The New Criterion

November 1997

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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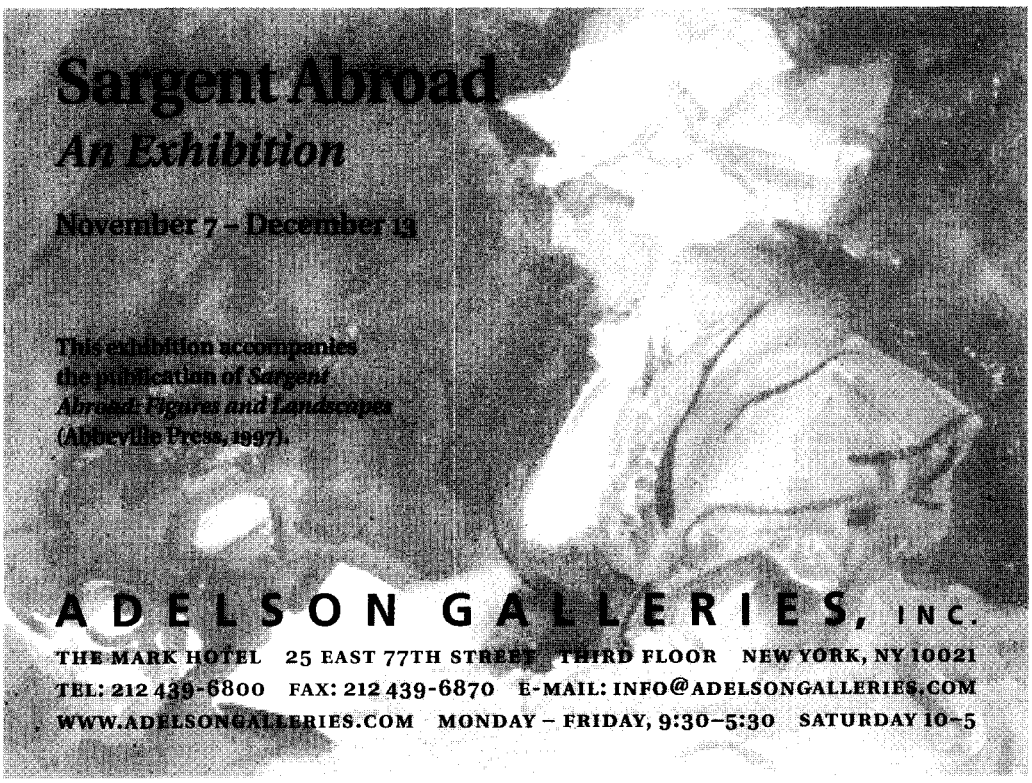
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Editor & Publisher *Hilton Kramer*
Managing Editor *Roger Kimball*
Poetry Editor *Robert Richman*
Associate Editor *David Yezzi*
Assistant to the Editors *Francesca Marx*
Editorial Intern *Maxwell Watman*

Publisher 1982–1994 *Samuel Lipman*

Contributors to this issue

Brooke Allen reviews books regularly for *The New Criterion*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and other publications.

J. Duncan Berry reviewed Harry Francis Mallgrave's *Gottfried Semper* in our November 1996 issue.

James Bowman is the American editor of the London *Times Literary Supplement* and the film critic of *The American Spectator*.

Alexander Coleman reviews music regularly for *The New Criterion*.

Paul Dean is the head of the English Department at Portsmouth Grammar School, Portsmouth, England.

Susan Haack is the author of *Evidence and Inquiry: Towards Reconstruction in Epistemology* (Blackwell).

Donald Hall's most recent book of poems is *The Old Life* (Houghton Mifflin).

Roger Kimball's essay in this issue is the third in his series on America's cultural revolution.

William Logan's latest book of poems, *Vain Empires*, is forthcoming this spring from Penguin.

Mario Naves reviews art regularly for *The New Criterion*.

Mark Steyn is the film critic of the London *Spectator*.

Richard Tillinghast has recently edited *A Visit to the Gallery*, a collection of poems on paintings from the Museum of Art in Ann Arbor (University of Michigan).

Karen Wilkin's latest book, *Cézanne*, was published recently by Abbeville Press.

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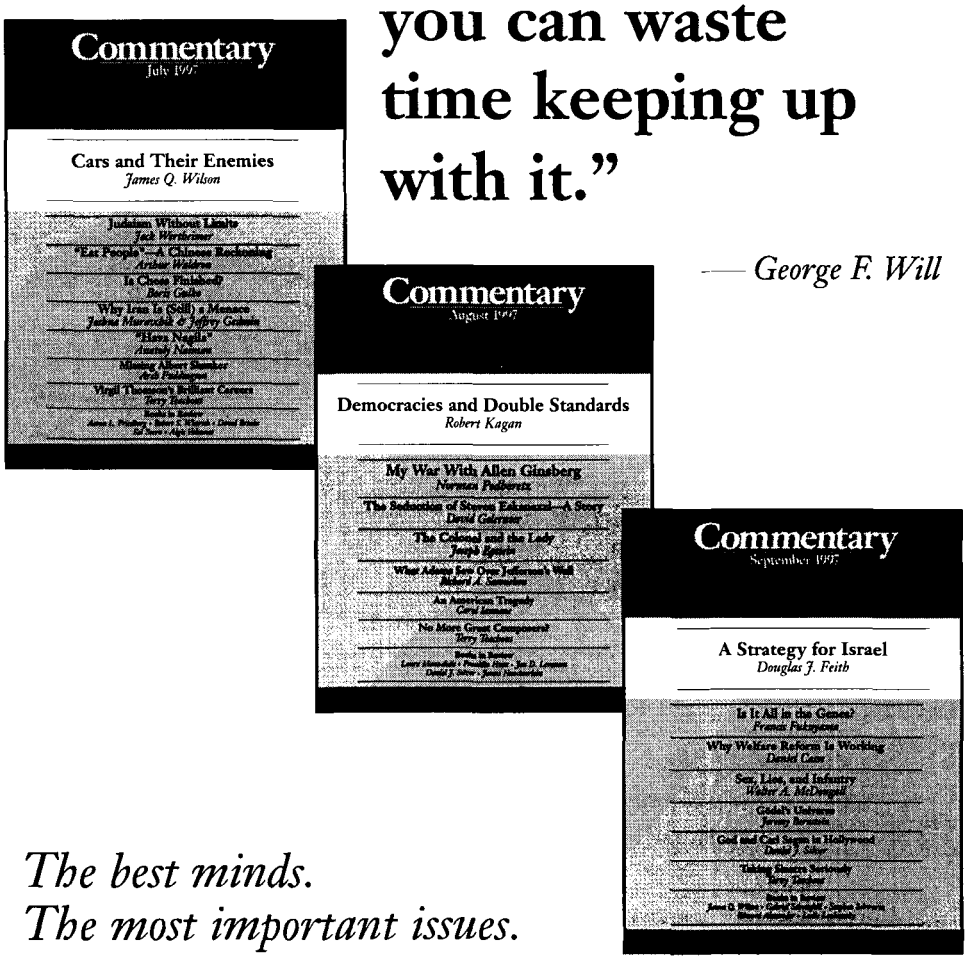

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Notes & Comments: November 1997

The NEA & the adversary culture

With the departure of Jane Alexander from the chairmanship of the National Endowment for the Arts, the country is no doubt in for yet another noisy round of acrimonious debate and media muddle over the purposes and practices of the Federal government's role in funding the arts and the institutions that serve them. It would be nice, of course, to think that this unfortunate replay of the old exhausted arguments could be avoided—that the appointment of Ms. Alexander's successor at the NEA might even be used as an occasion for shedding some fresh light on the divisive controversies that have plagued this hapless agency for some years now. But we very much doubt that this will happen.

For the terms in which the problems of the NEA are now debated by both its champions and its critics no longer have much to do with advancing the cause of high achievement in the arts. To the nation's great misfortune, high achievement in the arts has come to be stigmatized as evidence of "elitism." As a consequence, the discussion on all sides of the NEA problem now has much more to do with social policy than with artistic accomplishment, and for this fateful shift in priorities the NEA is itself largely to blame. It was the NEA that sowed the seeds of its own destruction when it succumbed to the policy of judging the arts on the basis of their social agendas rather than on their artistic merits.

This shift in the agency's grant-making powers occurred long before Ms. Alexander arrived at the NEA. It was given its greatest impetus during the Carter administration in the late 1970s, and, despite some valiant attempts during the Reagan administration to temper the practice, the policy of substituting social criteria for artistic standards remained in force as the defining culture of the NEA. It was indeed during the Reagan and Bush administrations that the now regnant culture of the NEA added a new name and a new ideology to its own social agenda: multiculturalism, which also operates under the rubric of "diversity."

It cannot be said that Ms. Alexander herself ever exhibited the slightest understanding of what this development signified. Above all, she never understood that the NEA's entrenched practice of judging the arts by the social agendas they claimed to advance—rather than by disinterested artistic standards—was a glaring problem for an agency charged with supporting the arts. Indeed, far from addressing this problem, Jane Alexander aggravated it by slavishly following established precedent in embracing the practice as a policy to be defended. This is the principal reason that her tenure at the

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NEA proved to be such a shambles. She seemed never to be able to grasp what the controversies were really about.

Those controversies were never more than incidentally about the pornography or blasphemy to be found in certain exhibitions and performances funded by the Endowment. Those were important issues, to be sure, for it was never in the public interest for a government agency to appear to be supporting sexual indecency or attacks on the religious beliefs of its citizens. These were impulses that were already flourishing, without widespread censure, in the larger and increasingly permissive private sector of American cultural life, which of course commands a far bigger budget and ultimately wields much greater influence than does the NEA.

What the NEA was being called upon to provide for such antisocial cultural imperatives was a public stamp of approval, and it was well understood by its advocates that such an endorsement would be seen to be an affront to the public itself. This, indeed, was the principle reason for seeking NEA support for "controversial" projects like the Robert Mapplethorpe exhibition. The actual sum of money involved was incidental, for the financial resources of the Mapplethorpe estate greatly exceeded the paltry grant requested of the NEA. The whole point was to win official approval of what in that famous case was a sexual subculture guaranteed to be offensive to public taste—a subculture that specialized in consensual sexual torture. Artistic merit was never the main issue. What was being sought—and what the NEA proved eager to grant—was yet another public endorsement of an extreme example of the adversary culture that already reigned supreme in the private sector of the art world, and indeed throughout the arts and entertainment industries.

What the debate about the future of the National Endowment for the Arts should mainly focus on, then, is whether an agency of the Federal government ought to continue using public money to support an adversary culture: a culture that is not so much critical as openly contemptuous of the traditional moral and civic values of mainstream American society. As we have seen again and again over the last two decades, the gradual institutionalization of the adversary culture at the heart of American society requires that taxpayers in effect collaborate in the disparagement and ridicule of their own moral and religious beliefs.

This is something that the political commentator Irving Kristol saw with great clarity in his 1979 essay "The Adversary Culture of Intellectuals." "It is not uncommon," Mr. Kristol wrote,

> that a culture will be critical of the civilization that sustains it—and always critical of the failure of this civilization to realize perfectly the ideals that it claims as inspiration. Such criticism is implicit or explicit in Aristophanes and Euripides, Dante and Shakespeare. But to take an adversary posture toward the ideals themselves? That is unprecedented.

The great peculiarity of our time is that the people and institutions entrusted with upholding the values of our culture have often turned out to be the most implacable enemies of those values. As Mr. Kristol observed, "the more 'cultivated' a person is in our society, the more disaffected and malcontent he is likely to be—a disaffection, moreover, directed not only at the actuality of our society but at the ideality as well."

In recent years, the National Endowment for the Arts has become synonymous with this culture of disaffection. Consequently, its public identity has been informed not by the many laudable enterprises that it supports but by the ethos of "transgression" that spokesmen for the Endowment never had the courage to castigate and distance themselves from. This is the chief reason that the NEA has become a political lightning rod. Partisans of the adversary culture would have us believe that the only alternative to the nihilism they teach is philis-

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tinism. But the question that Jane Alexander's departure from the NEA may finally allow us to ask is whether we wish to perpetuate a situation in which this symbolically important agency is hostage to the grotesque anti-ideals of a depraved adversary culture. There is nothing inevitable about the moral chaos with which the Endowment has become identified. But whether the Endowment in anything like its present form can free itself from the taint of that identification is another matter entirely.

SUNY's carnival of perversity

Of course, the NEA is hardly the only cultural institution in American society beset by moral chaos. The humanities departments of American colleges and universities are, if anything, in even worse shape, and for the same reason. They, too, have embraced the ethic of transgression dictated by the adversary culture. The sad truth is that much that goes on in the name of humanistic education today is little more than a carnival of perversity. It is orchestrated by college-bred gender-race-class radicals who are bent not on getting an education but on "testing the boundaries" of acceptable behavior—as if that were what the privilege of liberal learning is all about. It is a further testimony of the moral chaos in which our society is mired that such antics are not only tolerated but also positively encouraged by pusillanimous college administrators who long ago reneged on their responsibility as educators and who can be counted upon to meet every moral challenge by squeaking about "free speech" and "diversity."

In case this indictment seems too harsh, consider the treat that the State University of New York at New Paltz recently offered the public. For November 1, the Women's Studies Program scheduled a conference at the college called "Revolting Behavior: The Challenges of Women's Sexual Freedom." A pamphlet, mailed at taxpayer expense, describes the program. In the morning, a "keynote panel" offered students and the public papers like "Empowerment as a Strategy for Reclaiming Our Sexuality: The Experience with Latinas" and "From Judgment to Desire: A Brief Historical Overview of Lesbian Sexuality." Then there were the "workshops," on some twenty subjects, including "Sex Toys for Women," "The Effect of Religion on Women's Sexual Experience," "How to Get What You Want in Bed," "Queer Sexuality: A Spectrum of Women's Experience," "Safe, Sane & Consensual S/M: An Alternate Way of Loving," and "Writing Erotica into Our Journals." For the evening, the women's studies department promised us "Whiplash: Tale of a Tomboy," an hour-long entertainment by Shelly Mars, a "performance artist" who, a university press release informed us, was "working as a stripper in a bisexual bathhouse [when she] began to experiment with character development as a way to alleviate the sometimes demeaning aspects of her job."

That was on November 1. For the weekend of November 7 and 8, SUNY New Paltz scheduled "Arts Now 1997," a national conference called "Subject to Desire: Refiguring the Body." Sponsored in part by the College at New Paltz Foundation and the Office of the Dean of the School of Fine & Performing Arts, this event is yet another exercise in pornography dressed up in polysyllabic gobbledygook, featuring, e.g., an "installation" called "Vulva's School" by Carolee Schneemann, best known for an act in which she slowly unravels a scroll from her vagina while reading it aloud to the audience. In an earlier age, such behavior, if it occurred at all, would have been confined to the precincts of a freak show. Now it is endorsed by a college dean as part of an "ambitious preoccupation" that "encourages participants to explore new ideas." As if these rebarbative radical clichés had anything to do with "new ideas"! Are such corrupting parodies of education really what parents and other taxpayers in New York State wish to support? We doubt it.

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Reflections on a cultural revolution: III

Norman Mailer's American dream

by Roger Kimball

The sour truth is that I am imprisoned with a perception which will settle for nothing less than making a revolution in the consciousness of our time.
—Norman Mailer, *Advertisements for Myself* (1959)

Men of great power and magnificent ambition, men who become Presidents or champions of the world, are, if one could look into their heads, men very much like Mailer.
—Richard Poirier, *Norman Mailer* (1972)

No study of America's cultural revolution can omit the case of Norman Mailer: novelist, wife-stabber, political activist, sometime candidate for mayor of New York, and perpetual *enfant terrible*. Born in Long Branch, New Jersey, in 1923, Mailer was brought up in Brooklyn, "a nice Jewish boy," as he once put it, from a middle-class family of first-generation immigrants. Mailer matriculated at Harvard in 1939, graduating in 1942. In 1944 he married for the first of (so far) six times. From 1944 to 1946, he served with the U.S. Army in the Philippines and Japan.

In 1948, when he was only twenty-five, Mailer's war novel, *The Naked and the Dead*, was published. In literary terms, *The Naked and the Dead* ranks somewhere below the war novels of Herman Wouk and James Jones. It is more pretentious, but less well-crafted, and its narrative develops less momentum. Its heavy-handed psychologizing and use of four-letter words were thought smart in 1948; most contemporary readers will find them quaint if not downright embarrassing. Nevertheless, *The Naked and the Dead* was an immediate and immense success. It catapulted its young author to an atmosphere of wealth, adulation, and celebrity from which he has yet to descend. Whatever else can be said about it, the reception of *The Naked and the Dead* is an object lesson in the perils—what it might please Norman Mailer to call the "existential" perils—of early success. Mailer himself has never recovered.

For readers who did not witness his elevation to the role of literary-political culture hero, it is difficult to appreciate the awe with which Norman Mailer was regarded by the literary and academic establishment from the 1950s through the 1970s. A typical paean is Diana Trilling's convoluted 1962 essay "The Radical Moralism of Norman Mailer," which concludes by comparing Mailer to the prophet Moses "with a stopover at Marx." "His moral imagination," Mrs. Trilling assured her readers, "is the imagination not of art but of theology, theology in action." Which means . . . ? Very little, alas, though talk of "theology in action" (as distinct, perhaps, from "theology asleep"?) doubtless sparked interesting vibrations in susceptible souls. As Mailer more or less admitted in what is probably his best-known collection, *Advertisements for Myself* (1959)—a title that could be used again for his complete works—he was a

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sucker for mystification: "mate the absurd with the apocalyptic, and I was captive."

No one, not even Susan Sontag, combined critical regard, popular celebrity, and radical chic politics with quite the same insouciance as did Mailer. From the late 1940s on, he showed himself to be extraordinarily deft at persuading credulous intellectuals to collaborate in his megalomania. Although he modeled his persona on the less attractive features of Ernest Hemingway—booze, boxing, bullfighting, and broads—he managed to update that pathetic, shopworn *machismo* with some significant postwar embellishments: reefer, radicalism, and Wilhelm Reich, for starters. There was also the matter of royalties. The glittering example of Mailer's commercial success was obviously the cynosure that many aspiring writers set out to follow: his neat trick was to combine cachet with large amounts of cash. In 1955, Mailer helped to found *The Village Voice*, which, though always riven by internal dissension, quickly became a bible of New Left orthodoxy. By the mid-1960s, he had emerged as an established antiestablishment guru. In *Scriptures for a Generation*, a left-leaning synopsis of radical texts from the Sixties, the academic critic Philip Beidler observed that

> there is no doubt that Mailer as a literary intellectual wished to assume the mantle of '60s youth-illuminatus, at once existential prophet and pied piper. Accordingly, his career across the decade revealed a relentless, almost obsessive wish to be the voice of '60s adversarial culture in its broadest sense: a voice uniting the radical intelligentsia *and* dissenting youth in a new project of revolutionary consciousness spilling over from bohemian lofts and campus enclaves into the streets of the nation at large.

The spectacular success of works like *The Armies of the Night* (1968)—Mailer's bloated, quasi-fictional account of the 1967 march on the Pentagon and his own role in the demonstration—bore witness to his gifts for literary demagoguery. Subtitled *History as a Novel, the Novel as History*, the book deliberately blurred fact and fiction, a procedure gratefully seized upon by a public eager to sacrifice truth to the demands of ideological zeal. Indeed, it was a procedure that characterized the intellectual—or, more accurately, the anti-intellectual—temper of a generation battened on mind-altering drugs and taught to regard any appeal to facts as an unacceptably "authoritarian" threat. Among anti-Vietnam War radicals—which is to say, among nine out of ten establishment intellectuals—Mailer's exercise in narcissistic psycho-history was greeted with ecstatic hosannas, and duly picked up both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award. (Sample from the critic Richard Gilman: "Mailer has opened up new possibilities for the literary imagination and new room for us to breathe in the crush of actuality." From Nat Hentoff: "Mailer has won clear claim to being the best writer in America.")

In fact, like almost all of Mailer's books, *The Armies of the Night* is badly written—almost preposterously so. It has often been observed that Mailer's early literary heroes were Hemingway and John Dos Passos. But his own writing totally lacks Hemingway's lapidary craftsmanship and Dos Passos's cinematic control. When *The Armies of the Night* was serialized in *Harper's*, to the great excitement of the editor, Willie Morris, a young copy editor complained about Mailer's prose and, as one witness recollects, asked, "I wonder what he writes like when he's sober?" The unfortunate copy editor was promptly fired. But she was right: *The Armies of the Night* is a hyperbolic, self-indulgent mess that looks sillier and more naïve with every year that passes. Its famous third-person narrative strikes one now as a facile gimmick: "Mailer discovered he was jealous. Not of the talent. [Robert] Lowell's talent was very large, but then Mailer was a bulldog about the value of his own talent. . . . Nonetheless, to Mailer it was now *mano a mano*." That "*mano a mano*" is about as close to Hemingway as Mailer gets.

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The adulation that greeted *The Armies of the Night* underscores an important fact about Mailer's success. It is part of Mailer's genius—unconscious, perhaps—to have been able to calibrate his deficiencies precisely to the deficiencies of the moment. His clichés have been celebrated as brave insights because they have mirrored exactly the defining clichés of the time. Well into the 1970s, anyway, Mailer instinctively knew exactly what register of rhetorical excess would galvanize the left-wing intellectual establishment. It has proved to be a profitable talent. By the time he came to write *The Prisoner of Sex* (1971), he was widely rumored to be up for a Nobel Prize, a rumor that absorbed his full attention for the first thirty pages of that execrable book.

This is not to say that Mailer has escaped criticism. Far from it. His second and third novels, *The Deer Park* (1955) and *Barbary Shore* (1961), were widely attacked, as indeed was *An American Dream* (1965). This was the infamous novel in which the hero, Stephen Rojack, a savvy, tough-guy intellectual—just like Norman Mailer, you see—starts out by strangling his wife. He then walks downstairs and buggers his wife's accommodating German maid, a former Nazi who declares "I do not know why you have trouble with your wife. You are an absolute genius, Mr. Rojack." (Buggery—another *b*—was to become an obsession with Mailer.) There are numerous Mailerian fingerprints in the novel. President Kennedy ("Jack") calls to convey his condolences; Rojack's wife is rumored to have had affairs with men high up in the British, American, and Soviet spy agencies; even Marilyn Monroe—who was to become one of Mailer's more notorious obsessions—makes a posthumous cameo appearance when Rojack fantasizes about having a telephone conversation with a dead character: "the girls are swell. Marilyn says to say hello." But the chief point of the book is that Rojack gets away with the murder. Such, Mailer wants us to believe, is the real if unacknowledged "American dream."

The novel carried an additional *frisson*. A few years before, at a party he threw to announce his mayoral candidacy on the "Existentialist" ticket, Mailer got drunk and stabbed his wife Adele (number two), nearly killing her. (In 1969, Mailer ran for mayor again, this time on the "Secessionist" ticket, which proposed that New York City become the fifty-first state.) Adele declined to press charges, and so Mailer escaped with a fortnight in Bellevue for observation. This episode seems to have titillated more than it repelled Mailer's circle of friends; in any event it brought very little condemnation. As Irving Howe put it, "Among 'uptown intellectuals' there was this feeling of shock and dismay, and I don't remember anyone judging him. The feeling was that he'd been driven to this by compulsiveness, by madness. He was seen as a victim." Readers who wonder how stabbing his wife could make Mailer a "victim"—and who ask themselves, further, what Mailer's being a victim would then make Adele—clearly do not have what it takes to be an "uptown intellectual" in the Irving Howe mold.

If Mailer's attempted murder of his wife met with little censure, *An American Dream* did not escape so easily. It had its admirers. But the critic Stanley Edgar Hyman, in a devastating review called "Norman Mailer's Yummy Rump," spoke for many when he judged it "a dreadful novel," "infinitely more pretentious than the competition," whose "awfulness is really indescribable."

Something similar, in truth, can be said about all of Mailer's books. It is hard to say which is the most pretentious. In absolute terms, the palm must probably go to his most recent novel, *The Gospel According to the Son* (1997), Mailer's effort at rewriting the Gospel story in the first person. It is a tall order to write not simply about but *as* Jesus. But *Ancient Evenings* (1983), a phantasmagoric tale featuring reincarnation and set in Egypt around 2000 BC, is a close runner-up. Mailer really indulges his fondness for buggery in this "novel," picturing it—along with various other sex acts—taking place between and among various char-

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acters as they mutate in and out of existence. Actually having a body does not, for Mailer, seem to be a prerequisite for any form of sexual congress. The one thing that can be said for *Ancient Evenings* is that it displays Mailer's not inconsiderable gifts for unintentional comedy, which are on a par with those of Margaret Dumont. Mailer is funniest when he waxes solemn:

> "Let me tell you again. There is the magic we invoke, and the magic that calls upon us. Do you recall that Isis dropped the fourteenth piece of the body of Osiris in the salts of Yeb, and saw battles to come between Horus and Set? That was a warning to find a proper sacrifice or there would be no peace. She heard Her own voice tell Her to slaughter a bull, but as she killed the beast, Her voice also told Her that the sacrifice was not great enough to compensate for the evil powers of Set. She must add the blood of a more painful loss. She must cut off her own head, and replace it with the bull's face." Menenhetet now giggled.

And who can blame him?

Ancient Evenings illustrates why readers who came to Norman Mailer in the 1970s and 1980s have a difficult time understanding the reverence with which he was once regarded by chic intellectuals. Who could take this man seriously? The truth is that Norman Mailer very quickly became a parody of himself. Since the Sixties was itself a ghastly caricature of political radicalism, few people at the time seemed to notice just how ridiculous Mailer's preening exhibitionism and blustering pronouncements were. But as the years passed and Mailer became more and more indiscriminate in his enthusiasms, Mailer the sage was gradually revealed as Mailer the buffoon.

The point of no return was probably *Marilyn* (1973), a picture-book-cum-biography of Marilyn Monroe. It is difficult to say with confidence which of Mailer's books is really his worst: he has managed to be truly awful in several distinct ways. But *Marilyn* is certainly his silliest book. Over the years, Mailer's fascination with the Star Who Slept with the Kennedys developed into an unhealthy obsession. As the critic John Simon observed in his review of the book, what Mailer had given us with *Marilyn* was "a new genre called transcendental masturbation or metaphysical wet dreaming." In real life, Marilyn Monroe was an unhappy sexpot, a sometimes amusing but distinctly mediocre comic actress. But for Mailer she is a combination of Aphrodite and Ellen Terry. On the one hand, he says, Monroe was a "superb" actress who "possessed the talent to play Cordelia"; she was "Madame Bovary and Nana all in one"; "one might literally have to invent the idea of a soul in order to approach her." On the other hand, she was "a very Stradivarius of sex," "the angel of Sex": "she had learned by Mind," Mailer writes, "to move sex forward—sex was not unlike an advance of little infantrymen of libido sent up to the surface of her skin. She was a general of sex before she knew anything of sexual war." If he were still here, Menenhetet would again be convulsed with the giggles.

No one in our sex-obsessed culture is likely to underestimate the importance of sexual gratification in the lives of most people. But Mailer is monomaniacal on the subject. It is not only the center of his universe, it is also the periphery and everything in between. In *Marilyn*, he remarks in passing that "it is a rule of thumb today: one cannot buy a Polaroid in a drugstore without announcing to the world, one chance in two, the camera will be used to record a copulation of family or friends." One chance in two? As the critic Joseph Epstein observed, "it is a sign of the deep poverty of Norman Mailer's imagination that the only climax he can imagine in any human relationship is really just that—a sexual climax." It is all the more ironic, then, that Mailer should display such a profound misunderstanding of sex. It is his one true subject, but he has got it all wrong.

Indeed, if Marilyn Monroe is "the angel of Sex," Norman Mailer is its Walter Mitty. He constructs absurd melodramas of sexual

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conquest and then casts himself as the inevitable hero. His ubiquitous descriptions of sex are wince-makingly embarrassing. In "The Time of Her Time," for example—a fictional sketch that concludes *Advertisements for Myself* and of which Mailer was particularly proud—the hero refers to his penis as "the avenger" and is taken to saying things like "For her, getting it from me, it must have been impressive." In *The Prisoner of Sex*, which Mailer intended as an answer to *Sexual Politics*, Kate Millet's once famous feminist screed, we read about "the power of the semen going over the hill" as well as "the ovum [that] in its turn would be ready as any priestess to greet the arcane and dismiss the common, ready as a whore to welcome a wad or get rid of a penniless prick, ready as an empress to find a lord or turn her face to the wall." The moral of this is, perhaps, that an egg's work is never done.

Mailer's penchant for bombast makes him a difficult writer to parody; one can never be sure that he hasn't said something even more outrageous than the caricature. Still, Elizabeth Hardwick caught something essential about Mailer in the parody she wrote (under the pseudonym Xavier Prynne) of *The Presidential Papers* (1963) for *The New York Review of Books*:

> This 6th note was ignored by LBJ, but attacked by the Black Negroes and the FBI. One admits that a lot of it is lousy—I was having personal troubles at the time—but I still think it lousy but good. The Bitch Goddess didn't quite get into bed with me this round, but at least she didn't get into bed with Bill Styron either, up in his plush Connecticut retreat. All the Bitch did was blow into my ear—one of those mysterious pre-psychotic Jackie Kennedy whispers. My answer to the FBI would run this way: *The existential orgasm would make atomic war and even atomic testing impossible* . . .

The problem with this virtuoso performance is that it is virtually indistinguishable from the writing it set out to spoof. Its perfection as an exercise in mimicry renders it void as parody.

Although the unwitting comic dimension of Mailer's writing is large, its humorous potential should not be allowed to obscure its many sinister elements. Norman Mailer is funny unintentionally; he is knowingly repulsive. He is an important figure in America's cultural revolution not because people found him ridiculous but, on the contrary, because they took this ridiculous man seriously.

Mailer has written a great deal about political matters. But in the end, Mailer regards politics the way he regards everything else, as a coefficient of sex. As he put it in *Advertisements for Myself*, "the only revolution which will be meaningful and natural for the twentieth century will be the sexual revolution one senses everywhere." Even his identity as an "existentialist" is filtered through sexual anxiety: "a man is in a more existential position than a woman," Mailer assures us: "he has to get an erection." (In fact, in Mailer's writing, the term "existential" and its cognates are little more than positive epithets, devoid of content: "we find ourselves in an existential situation," Mailer writes in one typical passage, "whenever we are in a situation where we cannot foretell the end"—which is less illuminating than Delmore Schwartz's wry observation that existentialism means that no one else can take a bath for you.) It is in his ideas about sex, especially as he relates them to the rest of life, that Mailer has been most influential and most destructive. It would be difficult to overstate the crudeness of his position. In 1973, in one of the countless interviews he has given, Mailer was asked for his opinion about legalized abortion. Mailer thought well enough of his answer to reprint it in *Pieces and Pontifications* (1982):

> I think when a woman goes through an abortion, even legalized abortion, she goes through hell. There's no use hoping otherwise. For what is she doing? Sometimes she has to be saying to herself, "You're killing the memory of a beautiful fuck." I don't think abortion is a great strain when the act was some miser-

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> able little screech, or some squeak oozed up through the trapdoor, a little rat which got in, a worm who slithered under the threshold. That sort of abortion costs a woman little more than discomfort. Unless there are medical consequences years later.
>
> But if a woman has a great fuck, and then has to abort, it embitters her.

Of course, it is possible that Mailer was being deliberately outrageous in his response. Nevertheless, this is the declaration of a moral cretin.

It is one of the peculiarities of Mailer's writings about sex that he seems barely to distinguish it from violent physical conflict. His depictions of lovemaking are almost always cast in terms of struggle and domination. There is scarcely any room for warmth or tenderness. Desire reveals itself first of all as a desire for conquest. No doubt this is one reason forced buggery features so prominently in his writings. Sex in Mailer is not so much an act of union as brute subordination. This is part of what makes it, for Mailer, so "existential." As a macho existentialist, Mailer sees, or pretends to see, everything as a battle, a "war." Indeed, despite his virulent anti-Vietnam War stand, "war" is one of Mailer's abiding obsessions. It's part of his Hemingway pose: he likes to bluster about life being a continual struggle—*mano a mano* as he might put it—with the void. In "A Public Notice on Waiting for Godot," in which Mailer tells us that he regards Samuel Beckett as "a minor artist," he writes that "man's nature, man's dignity, is that he acts, lives, loves, and finally destroys himself seeking to penetrate the mystery of existence, and unless we partake in some way, as some part of this human exploration (and war) then we are no more than the pimps of society and the betrayers of our Self." Destroys himself? Pimps of society? Mailer is clearly the captive of a debased, self-aggrandizing Romanticism. He manufactures little melodramas to ventilate the tedium of his comfortable, bourgeois existence. It is a familiar adolescent gambit. But Mailer has managed to prolong his pubescent rage into his seventies. It is what has made him so productive of comic relief. It is also what underlies his fascination with violence.

Many critics believe that *The Executioner's Song* (1979) is Mailer's best book. Subtitled *A True Life Novel*, it tells the *In Cold Blood*-type story of the arrest and execution by firing squad of Gary Gilmore, a psychopathic killer who had spent most of his thirty-odd years in jail. Written in a clipped, unembellished style, the book contains some of Mailer's most urgent and compelling prose. Considered as a moral document, however, *The Executioner's Song* is profoundly repulsive. For Mailer does not simply delve into and display the humanity of the tortured killer he writes about: he in effect offers him up as a kind of hero, a courageous "outsider" who deserves our sympathy as a Victim of Society and our respect as an implacable rebel.

After Gilmore had been executed, Mailer's attention was captured by Jack Abbott, a violent convict and self-declared Communist who began writing Mailer long "existential" letters about life in prison. Mailer loved them. He helped Abbott have them published, first in *The New York Review of Books* and then as a book, called *In the Belly of the Beast* (1981). In his introduction, Mailer described Abbott as "an intellectual, a radical, a potential leader, a man obsessed with a vision of more elevated human relations in a better world that revolution could forge." It seems clear that Mailer's interest helped to expedite Abbott's release from prison: "Culture," Mailer declared at one point, "is worth a little risk." Abbott had scarcely set foot in New York when he stabbed and killed Richard Adan, a twenty-two-year-old waiter. Mailer testified on Abbott's behalf at the ensuing murder trial.

Mailer's flirtation with criminals like Gary Gilmore and Jack Abbott must be seen as the fulfillment of his celebration of the "psychopath" as an existential hero. In his notorious essay "The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster," first published in *Dissent* in 1957, Mailer definitively

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articulated an ethic that underlies not only his own view of the world but also the view that would inform the cultural revolution of the 1960s. In tone, "The White Negro" is a panoply of "existentialist" rant. In content, it is a manifesto on behalf of moral nihilism. Mailer speaks casually of "the totalitarian tissues of American society" and invokes "the psychic havoc of the concentration camps and the atom bomb upon the unconscious mind of almost everyone alive in these years." The only authentic response to this situation, he says, is "to divorce oneself from society" and "to encourage the psychopath in oneself." This is the strategy of "the hipster," who has "absorbed the existentialist synapses of the Negro, and [who] for practical purposes could be considered a white Negro." (Mailer's stereotypical portrayal of blacks as beastlike sexual athletes is one of the many distasteful things about the essay.)

The rest of "The White Negro" is a glorification of the hipster and his ethic of promiscuous sex, drug-taking, and criminal violence. The hipster, Mailer explains, is part of "an elite with the potential ruthlessness of an elite, and a language most adolescents can understand instinctively, for the hipster's intense view of existence matches their experience and their desire to rebel." Mailer conjures the image—it is what made the essay infamous—of eighteen-year-old hoodlums who "beat in the brains of a candy-store keeper." For Mailer such behavior is acceptable, even laudable, because the psychopath, by murdering, demonstrates his "courage" and "purge[s] his violence." To the objection that it does not take much courage to kill someone older and weaker, Mailer explains that "one murders not only a weak fifty-year-old man but an institution as well, one violates private property, one enters into a new relation with the police and introduces a dangerous element into one's life." Mailer goes on to explain that "at bottom, the drama of the psychopath is that he seeks love." Not, however, "love as the search for a mate, but love as the search for an orgasm more apocalyptic than the one which preceded it. Orgasm is his therapy—he knows at the seed of his being that good orgasm opens his possibilities and bad orgasm imprisons him." This is one reason that the hipster adores jazz: "jazz," Mailer tells us, "is orgasm." The hipster's quest "for absolute sexual freedom" entails the necessity of "becoming a sexual outlaw."

It is not only sexual morality that the hipster discards. "Hip abdicates from any conventional moral responsibility because it would argue that the results of our actions are unforeseeable, and so we cannot know if we do good or bad. . . . The only Hip morality . . . is to do what one feels whenever and wherever it is possible, and . . . to be engaged in one primal battle: to open the limits of the possible for oneself, for oneself alone, because that is one's need."

"The White Negro" adumbrates practically everything that went wrong with American society under the assault of left-wing radicalism in the 1960s, from the addiction to violence, drugs, pop music, and sexual polymorphism, to the moral idiocy, jejune anti-Americanism, and mindless glorification of narcissistic irresponsibility and extreme states of experience. Although many critics took issue with Mailer's exoneration of violence, the real message of the essay—if it feels good, do it!—was just then beginning to sweep the country with irresistible force. "The White Negro" represented an important opening salvo in the war on convention, restraint, and traditional morality. This, not his literary accomplishment, was the ultimate secret of Mailer's broad appeal. Mailer, as Joseph Epstein observed, "was one of the key men responsible for releasing the Dionysian strain in American life." He promised his readers what they longed to hear: that ultimate, self-centered ecstasy was theirs for the taking. Mailer once said that he would "settle for nothing less than making a revolution in the consciousness of our time." He did not make the revolution, but he assuredly became one of its most egregious emblems.

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"The Blacklist & the Cold War" revisited

by Hilton Kramer

I. Introduction

Few among the intellectuals in the Party realized at the time that their mentality was a caricature of the revolutionary spirit; that within the short span of three generations the Communist movement had travelled from the era of the Apostles to that of the Borgias. But the process of degeneration had been gradual and continuous, and the seeds of corruption had already been present in the work of Marx: in the vitriolic tone of his polemics, the abuse heaped on his opponents, the denunciation of rivals and dissenters as traitors to the working class and agents of the bourgeoisie.
—Arthur Koestler, *The Invisible Writing*

Fifty years ago this fall, the House Committee on Un-American Activities in Washington opened its famous hearings into Communist influence in Hollywood. To mark this anniversary occasion, the current Left-liberal establishment in Hollywood has thrown itself into a frenzy of commemorative events. These events are designed to honor the "victims" of the blacklist that resulted from those hearings, and reaffirm the "innocence" of the Communists and fellow travelers who remained abject in their loyalty to Stalin while refusing to acknowledge their political affiliations and beliefs. They are also designed, of course, to vilify the ex-Communists in their ranks who committed the unforgivable "crime" of telling the truth about this shameful allegiance to one of the most bloodthirsty tyrannies in this terrible century. As Patrick Goldstein wrote in an article called "Hollywood's Blackest Hour" in the *Los Angeles Times* of October 9, "In today's Hollywood, honors are given only to those who were blacklisted."

Needless to say, in this very long article in the *Los Angeles Times* there was no acknowledgement of what it meant to be under Communist Party discipline in the 1930s and 1940s, and no reference, either, to the political terror and the horrors of the Gulag that Hollywood money and influence helped to support during the worst years of Stalin's murderous reign. That it might be considered an even blacker hour in Hollywood's history when so many of its well-heeled talents threw their support to the enemies of American democracy—the enemies, indeed, of the very freedoms that enabled Hollywood itself to prosper—was also nowhere acknowledged. Today it is openly admitted that a good many of the once famous names that were blacklisted in Hollywood half a century ago *were* Communists, and were thus under Party discipline when they put on their ritual show of innocence and victimhood before the House Un-American Activities Committee. But fifty years later, the actualities of the Communist movement in America have disappeared from all discussion of the blacklist.

This climate of denial is not new, of

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course. For at least a quarter of a century it has been a flourishing enterprise in this country, and it is to remind our readers of its earlier history and bring them up to date on the mystifications and misrepresentations now rampant in the current literature on the subject that we are reprinting here the article I wrote for *The New York Times* on "The Blacklist and the Cold War" on October 3, 1976, and will next month publish an article on "The Blacklist as History" by the historian Ronald Radosh.

At the time that "The Blacklist and the Cold War" was written, I was working at *The New York Times* as the paper's chief art critic and art news editor. I had also served a brief stint in 1972 as the cultural news editor on the daily *Times*, and occasionally wrote on a broad range of other subjects for the paper. Soon after I returned from my summer vacation in 1976, one of the editors I worked with asked me to attend an advance screening of a movie called *The Front*, which starred Woody Allen. My editor had already seen the movie, and thought it might be something I would want to write about. When I saw the film, I understood why. It was about the blacklist, of course, and came at a time when Lillian Hellman's *Scoundrel Time* was enjoying immense acclaim. No sooner had I seen *The Front* then I attended a screening of another film, the documentary called *Hollywood on Trial* about the so-called Hollywood Ten who had turned the hearings of the House Committee on Un-American Activities into even more of a circus than they already were. It was left to me, however, to write about the subject in my own way. No editor ever told me what could or could not be said in such a piece, and the article appeared exactly as I wrote it—and as it appears below.

When it was published on the front page of the Sunday Arts & Leisure section of the *Times*, the article caused considerable uproar. The revisionist history of the Cold War, which attributed all evil intent to President Truman—and sometimes even to Winston Churchill—and portrayed Stalin as their innocent victim, was in full flower. The radical movement of the 1960s had also brought in its wake a revisionist history of the Communist movement that had flourished in this country from the 1930s until well into the 1940s and even the 1950s. I knew several people who didn't finally break with the Party until the Communist crackdown in Hungary in 1956. The immense power and influence on American cultural life that had been exerted by the Communist Party in the era of the Popular Front had been conveniently forgotten. It was considered bad taste to remind people of Stalin's crimes—or, indeed, of the immense role played by Stalinism in this country's politics and culture. It was still firmly believed by most liberals—the folks that wrote for *The New Yorker*, *The Nation*, and *The New Republic*, for example—that Alger Hiss was innocent. Many of those people also worked for the *Times*, and one of them tried to get me fired for writing "The Blacklist and the Cold War." It was bad luck for him, however, that the editor he appealed to for my dismissal happened to be the editor who had commissioned me to write the article in the first place.

Letters pro and con poured into the *Times* offices for weeks, some of them quite amazing. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., for example, wrote to say that "The Blacklist and the Cold War" should be required reading for everyone under the age of forty. Alfred Kazin also wrote a letter praising the piece. But there was no shortage of letters denouncing the article, and there were a few veteran reporters in the *Times* newsroom who never spoke to me again. For a certain liberal mindset, to be anti-Communist was the only truly unforgivable crime.

What caused especial consternation was the reference the article makes to what I called the "other" blacklist—the blacklist drawn up by Communists in Hollywood, Broadway, book publishing, and journalism that prohibited certain anti-Communists, many of them former Party members, who had broken with the Party, from working in their industries. Everyone who worked in

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those fields was well aware of this phenomenon, but I may have been the first to call it a blacklist—which is what it was, of course. But then, it was in the nature of Stalinism for its followers to lie about everything that impinged upon their political allegiance. We now know, for example, that Lillian Hellman lied when she denied her own membership in the Communist Party. And those denials had a very corrupting effect on the liberals who had been induced to embrace the Stalinist view of the Cold War—Garry Wills, for an egregious example, who, as far as I know, has yet to repudiate the mendacious account of the Cold War he contributed to the Introduction to *Scoundrel Time*.

II. The Blacklist & the Cold War

Who would ever have dreamed, a generation ago, that the blacklist and the Hollywood Ten, the sordid proceedings of the House Un-American Activities Committee, and the political vagaries of Joe McCarthy, would one day reemerge as a form of cultural chic? But this unlikely vicissitude, which would have strained the credulity of the Truman and Eisenhower era, is now decisively upon us.

Suddenly, a revisionist history is "in," and not only among the academic historians who, for a decade, have been laboring to persuade us that the Cold War was somehow a malevolent conspiracy of the Western democracies to undermine the benign intentions of the Soviet Union, but among filmmakers, writers, and producers. A new wave of movies, books, and television shows is assiduously turning the terrors and controversies of the late 1940s into the entertainments and bestsellers of the 1970s.

From what we have seen so far, the trend is unmistakable. The past week has brought us the opening of the new Woody Allen movie, *The Front*, which takes as its sometimes comic, sometimes serious theme the blacklisting of writers and actors in the television industry. Even before its release, *The Front* had itself become part of the "history" recounted in an ambitious new documentary movie, *Hollywood on Trial*, to be released later this month. We have already had a volume of letters, *Additional Dialogue*, by the late Dalton Trumbo, one of the Ten heroes of *Hollywood on Trial*, and we shall soon have a Trumbo biography by Bruce Cook. Three weeks ago, Channel 5 in New York broadcast a BBC documentary on the career of Edward R. Murrow that had as its climax the latter's 1954 "See It Now" program on Senator McCarthy, and a new three-hour television movie about a McCarthy-like figure, directed by Jud Taylor, will be broadcast on the NBC network in the spring.

Meanwhile, Lillian Hellman's much-praised memoir of the McCarthy period, *Scoundrel Time*, holds a firm place on the bestseller list for the twenty-first week, and publishers have signed up Murray Kempton, Nora Sayre, Victor Navasky, David Caute, and others for more books on the period. The well-known critic Eric Bentley has already used the transcripts of the House Un-American Activities Committee hearings as the basis of both a play, *Are You Now or Have You Ever Been*, and a thick documentary volume, *Thirty Years of Treason*. How long, one wonders, will it be before some jolly spirit mounts a Broadway musical about J. Parnell Thomas and the Hollywood Ten, or we are given a rock version of the Army-McCarthy hearings?

It is a phenomenon, all right—this wave of revisionist accounts, fictional and nonfictional, historical and mythological, of events that occurred a quarter-century ago—but what is it all about? And why now?

One thing it is about, certainly, is the present. The relation of the 1970s—of social, political and cultural attitudes today—to the 1960s bears a close resemblance to the relation in which the late 1940s and early 1950s stood to the 1930s. And just as the crises of the 1930s—and the values generated by those crises—were reenacted in the investigations and controversies of the late 1940s and 1950s, so the crises of the

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1960s—and the values and beliefs generated by them—are now under serious scrutiny and debate.

The Front and *Scoundrel Time* and *Hollywood on Trial*—to judge from the most recent works at hand—are thus as much a part of this reexamination of the 1960s, and especially the radicalism of the 1960s, as they are an attempt to redraw the history of an earlier era along lines—often, alas, fictional lines—that are sympathetic to the present climate of liberal opinion. The point, it seems, is to acquit 1960s radicalism of all malevolent consequence, and to do so by portraying 1930s radicalism as similarly innocent, a phenomenon wholly benign, altruistic, and admirable. Lillian Hellman puts the matter baldly in the last pages of *Scoundrel Time*. Of writers like herself, who for so long defended every Communist shibboleth and falsehood, she says: "Whatever our mistakes, I do not believe we did our country any harm." And of the writers who were anti-Communist she says: "I think they did." They gave us, in her view, the Vietnam War and Nixon.

Another thing these works are about, then, is the Cold War and détente—and very explicitly. *The Front* opens, even before Woody Allen's archetypal schlep-hero is drawn into a scheme to act as a front for a blacklisted writer, with a quick-cut patchwork of old newsreel footage. We are given glimpses of the war in Korea, General MacArthur, President Truman, the Rosenberg prosecution, civilian bomb shelters, the Vietnam War, etc., toward all of which we are expected to take an attitude of complete and unquestioned disapproval. *Scoundrel Time* is similarly prefaced—in this case, by Garry Wills's long essay in historical mystification that depicts "Truman's aggressiveness" as a form of premeditated political villainy and omits all reference to that distant and obscure figure, obviously considered irrelevant to the discussion—Josef Stalin. Which is rather unfair to Stalin, considering the role that his political influence once played in Miss Hellman's life.

If, for Mr. Wills (and, one must assume, Miss Hellman), it was President Truman who "launched the Cold War in the spring of 1947," then for Arnie Reisman, the author of *Hollywood on Trial*, it was Winston Churchill, and even earlier. Reactions will differ, of course, to the experience of hearing the voice of John Huston, the narrator of *Hollywood on Trial*, mouthing in all solemnity the judgment of Mr. Reisman that in 1946 "Winston Churchill drew an iron curtain across Eastern Europe." Again, it seems awfully unfair to Stalin to deny him proper credit for one of his most distinctive achievements—but that is the way things often are in the fantasy world of revisionist history. The imagery of perfect (Communist) innocence must be upheld, and the historical record adjusted accordingly.

It must be said, in this respect, that the Congressional investigations of Communist influence in the entertainment industry and the blacklisting that resulted from them—the common theme of *The Front*, *Scoundrel Time*, and *Hollywood on Trial*—are subjects almost ideally suited to buttressing this (false) imagery of innocence. The scenario abounds with easily recognized villains, from Congressmen out to grab a headline at any cost, to craven industry executives solely concerned to protect their careers and investments, to former comrades out to save their own necks. The investigations and the hearings were often conducted in an appalling manner. Their very nature created a situation in which informing became a career in itself, and innocent people *were* smeared and even destroyed by false accusations.

From which it does not follow, however, that all the accusations *were* false. Less easily recognized, from the current perspective anyway, are the other villains of the tale—the many wealthy dedicated Communists in the industry who—both because it was the Party line to do so and in the hope of saving *their* necks—denied their true commitments and beliefs, and thereby created an atmosphere of havoc and hazard for the truly innocent. Writing about the Hollywood Ten

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in *A Generation on Trial* (1952), a book generally sympathetic to Alger Hiss, Alistair Cooke observed that "they refused to say if they were Communists, in a series of hearings that the witnesses, just as much as the Committee, were responsible for turning into a squalid and rowdy parody of a court of law." Despite the best efforts of Mr. Reisman and the director of *Hollywood on Trial*, David Helpern, Jr., to have us think otherwise, the contribution of the Hollywood Ten to this "squalid and rowdy parody" comes through loud and clear in the old film clips of the hearings.

Still, the myth of total innocence must be upheld even where it is contravened by the acknowledged facts. When Dalton Trumbo died last month, *The New York Times* matter-of-factly reported in his obituary that he admitted in 1970, when he was securely restored to Hollywood clover, to having been a member of the Communist Party from 1943 to 1948, and again briefly in 1954—a fact conveniently omitted from the voluble interview with Trumbo that is part of *Hollywood on Trial*. Nor, in its earnest effort to portray the Hollywood Ten as champions of democracy and the underdog, does the film quote Trumbo's own contemptible comment on this commitment: "I never considered the working class anything other than something to get out of."

As for the industry, about which *The Front* and *Hollywood on Trial* are so pious, it responded as industry always responds to any manifest threat to its profits—with whatever mixture of caution, cowardice, prudence, hypocrisy, dissembling, and emergency planning it deemed necessary to its prosperity and survival. This was the ethic of the industry when the Hollywood Ten—and Lillian Hellman, too—were counted among its loyal, pampered, high-priced hacks. It was the ethic of the industry when it put its blacklists into effect. And is the ethic of the industry any different today, I wonder, when many of the former blacklistees are once again pleased to be the beneficiaries of its huge salaries and specious glamour?

The history of this period, dubbed *Scoundrel Time* by Miss Hellman, is anything but simple, but that is precisely what *The Front* and *Hollywood on Trial* urge us to believe—that the issues were all very simple, a matter of good guys versus bad guys, with all virtue accruing to the people who, in principle, denied the government the right to investigate what it judged to be threats to its security, and defied any government process that might illuminate such threats. In *The Front*, with its cartoon characterizations, the character played by Woody Allen gets the girl by defying the committee looking into his connection with the Communist or fellow-traveling writers he has been fronting for. The schlep becomes a moral hero, and the good guys win. In this scenario, as in *Hollywood on Trial*, the only real threat is the government itself, and those opportunists who exploited a climate of fear.

The climate now is very different, of course. Radicals are chic, the FBI is under a cloud, and the old blacklist has become a roll of honor. It is conveniently forgotten that once there were other blacklists. In *Hollywood on Trial*, only the director Edward Dmytryk—one of the Hollywood Ten—alludes to the lists of anti-Communists who were denied work when Stalinist influence was at its height. Unmentioned, too, are the vicious attacks that anti-Communist liberals and radicals were obliged to endure whenever they attempted to reveal the bloody truth about what Miss Hellman delicately describes now as the "sins" of the Stalinist regime. Who could guess, reading the *soigné* prose of *Scoundrel Time*, that Miss Hellman was once one of the most vigorous public defenders of those "sins," which even Kruschchev did not hesitate to call crimes involving the murder of hundreds of thousands, eventually millions, of innocent victims? Perhaps she has forgotten that she had joined in attacking the philosopher John Dewey, a pillar of the liberal establishment, for convening a commission of inquiry into the truth about the Moscow Trials. The

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climate now is indeed very different—it is a climate of amnesia.

So we are treated, in the course of *Hollywood on Trial*, to a glimpse of the most notorious of Hollywood's pro-Communist films, the egregious *Mission to Moscow*, with its scene of these same Moscow Trials showing us one of the old Bolsheviks "confessing" to being a paid German agent and a sweet-faced Stalin beaming with confidence and wisdom, and we are clearly expected to approve. We are treated to a lecture, in *Scoundrel Time*, on the alleged failure of "the good magazines, the ones that published the most serious writing . . . to come to the aid of those who were persecuted."

William Phillips, the editor of one of the magazines so described, *Partisan Review*, has written an interesting reply to *Scoundrel Time* in the current issue of that journal. He points out, in a reference to the other blacklist, the one that nobody talks about and that Woody Allen will certainly never make a movie about, that "I and other writers who had broken with Communism were kept from writing for various journals and prevented from getting not-so-lucrative university jobs because of the pressure and machinations of the Communists."

"Lillian Hellman's questions as to why we did not come to the defense of those who had been attacked by McCarthy is not as simple as it appears," Mr. Phillips continues.

> First of all, some were Communists and what one was asked to defend was their right to lie about it. . . . Another consideration was the feeling . . . that Communists did not have a divine right to a job in the government or in Hollywood. . . . Furthermore, it was not just a case of disagreeing with the Communists. They had branded us as the enemy. They were under orders not to speak to us. Their press called us every dirty name in and out of the political lexicon. And, of course, they were apologists for the arrest and torture of countless dissident writers in the Soviet Union and in other Communist countries . . . how could Lillian Hellman not know these things?

Such questions were seldom raised in the heyday of the radical movement in the 1960s, which is probably one reason why the myth of Communist innocence in the 1930s can now be propagated with such evident ease. What has been swamped in the new wave of revisionism about both the 1960s and the 1930s is the liberal view that regarded *both* Stalinism and the blacklists as threats to democracy—the view that looked upon the conduct of the House Un-American Activities Committee and the values of the Communist Party as plagues to be resisted.

Sitting through *The Front* and *Hollywood on Trial* and turning the pages of *Scoundrel Time* and reading the endless reviews that lavished it with so much praise, one is haunted by the question once posed, albeit in another context, by William Hazlitt: "Were we fools then, or are we dishonest now?"

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W. B. Yeats: "the labyrinth of another's being"

by Richard Tillinghast

The veils surrounding the twentieth century's greatest poet, William Butler Yeats, come in such degrees of thickness and coloration that we shall probably never see the man plain. The title of one of the first major critical studies, *Yeats: The Man and the Masks,* by Richard Ellmann, addressed the questions of disguise and shifting identities—questions that have continued to engage commentators. Yeats's early work planted so persuasively in readers' minds a picture of the dreamer swathed in the mists of the Celtic Twilight that the conflicting reality of him as a man of the world, a shrewd man of business keenly aware of cash flow, has come as a surprise and even a betrayal of some readers' images of him. Yeats went to his grave a convinced occultist and believer in the spirit world. Recent biography reveals that this mystic was also skillful at self-promotion, an experienced committee man, trenchant debater, and politician—not to mention a fierce competitor at croquet.

All this is complicated even further by Yeats's reinvention of himself in the early years of modernism, producing a flowering of mature poetry probably unequaled since the late plays of Shakespeare. The tendency among American readers to view all things Irish through a green veil of sentimentality —which Yeats himself played along with— doesn't help. Perhaps no life can be thoroughly understood, but the student of this great poet finds himself especially awed by the complex task of entering into what Yeats called "the labyrinth of another's being."

G. K. Chesterton, who encountered him wearing a top hat and carrying binoculars at the Dublin Horse Show in the early Twenties, was amazed by how much the supposedly otherworldly poet knew about horseflesh and handicapping. But such knowledge would have come naturally to Yeats, who as a young man lived in Sligo with his uncle George Pollexfen,

> In muscular youth well known to Mayo men
> For horsemanship at meets or at racecourses,
> That could have shown how pure-bred horses
> And solid men, for all their passion, live
> But as the outrageous stars incline
> By opposition, square and trine . . .
> ("In Memory of Major Robert Gregory")

His Uncle George was a convert to Yeats's belief in astrology and, like his nephew, evidently found nothing contradictory about the combination of interests. Perhaps the problem lies less in Yeats's prismatic self than in our own ideas about what constitutes an integrated personality.

A story often told, usually with an air of mildly scandalized amusement over pints of Guinness in Dublin's literary pubs, involves Yeats's reaction to being informed over the telephone by *Irish Times* editor Bertie Smyllie that he had won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1923. "Yeats halted the journalist's flow," as Keith Alldritt recounts the tale in

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his new biography, *W. B. Yeats: The Man and the Milieu,* "with a short, practical question. 'How much, Smyllie, how much is it?' The answer was £7,000."[1]

What the Irish call begrudgery is pandemic in the Dublin literary world, and no writer's success has been more grudgingly acknowledged by his compatriots—during his own time and continuing into the present—than Yeats's. In the "How much is it?" anecdote, Yeats figures as a hypocrite: the air of Parnassus is supposed to be unadulterated by the smell of money. The first volume of R. F. Foster's monumental *W. B. Yeats: A Life,* however, reveals for the first time the poverty of Yeats's youth.[2] As an adult he kept a sharp eye on the pounds, shillings, and pence because life under the rented and frequently shifting roof provided in London or Dublin by his father, the artist John B. Yeats, had been precarious and humiliating.

The Apprentice Mage covers Yeats's first fifty years. Alldritt himself devotes the first 240 of his 357 pages to this part of Yeats's life. In retrospect, because of our high valuation of Yeats's later poetry, it is hard to grasp that, for Yeats's contemporaries at the outbreak of the First World War, he seemed a man whose best work was already behind him. The twenty-five years that remained to him—the period of his miraculous late poetry—are fascinating in themselves, and one looks forward to the publication of Foster's second volume. His is not only the authorized biography; still, because of its thoroughness, it will become essential for students of Yeats.

Alldritt's *W. B. Yeats: The Man and the Milieu*, the title of which plays on Ellmann's ground-breaking work, is a good introductory book for the general reader. As well as having written other biographies and works of criticism, the author is a novelist with a knack for telling a story. He even illuminates certain issues that threaten to get lost under Foster's sheer accumulation of detail—the importance of patronage in the writing lives of the great modernists, for example: "In literary history Augusta Gregory's enduring support of Yeats compares in importance with that given to James Joyce by Harriet Shaw Weaver. Modernist literature was in considerable part a literature of patronage rather than of the market-place." This useful insight may partially explain the willful obscurity often encountered in modernist works.

Alldritt takes the "milieu" in his title seriously, supplying historical context helpful to readers who may need some reminding about the sweep of events in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Europe. I appreciated being reminded that shortly before Yeats's arrival in Paris during the 1890s, when he first met Synge and helped steer him toward the Aran Islands where the young playwright would discover his true subjects, there had been large demonstrations led by the Socialists. That in 1893 the anarchist Vaillant had hurled a bomb into the Chamber of Deputies, and that Captain Dreyfus had been court-marshaled the same year. The ultra-nationalism and anti-Semitism of the Dreyfus period help us understand the political orientation of Yeats's beloved Maud Gonne, who was carrying on a long affair with the right-wing French politician Lucien Millevoye.

And again, the novelist in Alldritt has a talent for supplying visual detail. Here is Yeats in Dublin just after winning the Nobel Prize and buying a large Georgian house in Merrion Square, one of Dublin's most impressive addresses:

> As a host Yeats dressed the part of the world-famous poet. He wore a black velvet coat and silver buckled shoes, a wide black ribbon attached to his tortoiseshell rimmed glasses. On his little finger he wore a large ring of gold. One of his guests was Sean O'Casey, a gauche, prickly little man wearing a cloth cap and

1 *W. B. Yeats: The Man and the Milieu,* by Keith Alldritt; Clarkson Potter, 388 pages, $35.

2 *W. B. Yeats: A Life. Volume I: The Apprentice Mage, 1865–1914*, by R. F. Foster; Oxford University Press, 640 pages, $35.

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steel-rimmed glasses who had grown up in the poorer neighborhoods in Dublin.

But Alldritt's work is not only less detailed than Foster's, it does not always inspire confidence as to its reliability. The reference in the preface to "T. S. Eilot's *Four Quartets*" immediately warns the reader to beware. Reference is made to "painting commissions which [John B. Yeats] obtained from well-to-do people in such nearby mansions as Muckross Abbey and Stradbally Hall." Nearby, perhaps, if the painter had owned a Learjet. Muckross is four counties away from Sligo in Kerry, near the town of Killarney. To reach Stradbally, Yeats senior would have had to travel diagonally south across Ireland to Athy, about fifty miles southwest of Dublin. In addition, Alldritt's literary criticism smacks of the graduate seminar: "Like other major modernist texts, 'Among Schoolchildren' commends an ontological rather than epistemological response to the life process. Being is to be prized over knowing." Indeed. Finally, the biographer's references to Yeats as "Willie" strike me as inappropriate. I found Foster's use of WBY for the poet and JBY for his father dignified and proper.

Looking back in his autobiographical book, *Reveries over Childhood and Youth,* Yeats in his late forties drew a veil over his painfully threadbare years as an unsuccessful artist's son in London and Dublin, preferring to dwell on carefree days spent in Sligo with his mother's family, the Pollexfens, wealthy merchants and ship owners. His father's people, the Yeatses, had a distinguished history but, in common with other members of the Protestant Ascendancy, had come down in the world as a result of the famine, land agitation, and immigration, which deprived the *rentier* class of their incomes during the mid-nineteenth century.

Yeats's romantic view of imperiled aristocracy was fed in his youth by sojourns to Sandymount Castle, a turreted Gothic mansion in the suburbs of Dublin. Here they rode to hounds and drank out of silver cups; Yeats's sister Lily would remember an older relative who "had a most impressive way of dropping his voice and saying dolefully, 'so very sad that so and so had to be sold.'" The Yeatses, linen merchants from Yorkshire, had come over to Dublin in the early eighteenth century. In 1773 one Benjamin Yeats married Mary Butler, from the distinguished family of the dukes of Ormonde, among the most powerful Anglo-Norman families in Ireland. The Yeatses were proud of their Ormonde connection and used Butler as a middle name for the next two centuries.

Yeats's mother's family derived from a less aristocratic lineage and were less caught up in regretting a vanished, partially fictional past. Unlike the Yeatses, they had the advantage of being rich: "The house was so big that there was always a room to hide in, and I had a red pony and a garden where I could wander, and there were two dogs to follow at my heels, one white with some black spots on his head and the other with long black hair all over him." The details of the two dogs are characteristic of Yeats's descriptive writing—always vivid but not necessarily going in any perceptible direction. His writing is wonderfully concrete, always with an eye to vigorous action.

Of his grandfather William Pollexfen he writes: "He had a violent temper and kept a hatchet at his bedside for burglars and would knock a man down instead of going to law, and I once saw him hunt a party of men with a horsewhip." Mr. Pollexfen may have been "in trade" and thus excluded from houses like Lissadell and Coole where Yeats would later be welcomed, but in his grandson's eyes he had all the virtues of the landed gentry. Thus a strong poet such as Yeats not only reinvented himself but even went back and reinvented his past.

Decisive, cleanly defined action was the meat and drink of Yeats's poetry. He associated it with a tradition growing out of the Middle Ages, a way of life whose mainstays were the aristocracy and the peasantry. A vigorous set of values centered around personal courage, sound workmanship, and pride has been his legacy not only to the

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Irish poets he addressed a month or two before his death in "Under Ben Bulben," but to a century of English-speaking poets who have apprenticed themselves to him:

> Irish poets, learn your trade,
> Sing whatever is well made,
> Scorn the sort now growing up
> All out of shape from toe to top,
> Their unremembering hearts and heads
> Base-born products of base beds.
> Sing the peasantry, and then
> Hard-riding country gentlemen . . .

Yeats's pride in ancestry, his scorn of anything common, made him anathema to critics on the Left, who have of course dominated the intellectual life of the twentieth century.

John B. Yeats, a Trinity College graduate and barrister who gave up the law just two years after the birth of his eldest son in order to study art, was as Foster puts it, "an unVictorian father" who wrote his wife during one of their frequent separations, "Working and caring for children makes me anxious and careful of them, but amusing them makes me fond of them." As inept as he was at supporting his children, and lacking the means to send them to good schools, he nevertheless provided them with an incomparable education for leading the artistic lives they were to lead: W. B. Yeats in poetry, Jack B. Yeats as a painter whose canvases fetch higher and higher prices every year, and the sisters "Lily" and "Lolly" as printers, book designers, weavers, and craftswomen.

When Yeats was in his mid teens the family moved back to Ireland from London, to live near Dublin in Howth, then a picturesque fishing village. At the age of fifteen or sixteen, he began to compose verses. In *Reveries over Childhood and Youth,* creating atmosphere with broad descriptive strokes, he writes, "My father's influence upon my thoughts was at its height. We went to Dublin by train every morning, breakfasting at his studio. He had taken a large room with a beautiful eighteenth-century mantelpiece in a York Street tenement-house, and at breakfast he read passages from the poets, and always from the play or poem at its most passionate moment." It is typical of Yeats's approach that the "beautiful eighteenth-century mantelpiece" somehow dominates the mood of the passage. What is striking is that the obscure and unsuccessful portrait painter John B. Yeats's aesthetic would become the prevailing aesthetic of modernist poetry: "He never read me a passage because of its speculative interest, and indeed did not care at all for poetry where there was generalization or abstraction however impassioned." Think of the Victorian poetry that was then in vogue and you will see how radical these ideas were at the time. He fostered in his son a conviction that the best poetry is always personal and dramatic:

> He did not care even for a fine lyric passage unless he felt some actual man behind its elaboration of beauty. . . . He thought Keats a greater poet than Shelley, because less abstract, but did not read him, caring little, I think, for any of that most beautiful poetry which has come in modern times from the influence of painting. All must be an idealization of speech, and at some moment of passionate action or somnambulistic reverie.

John B. Yeats's fitful to-ing and fro-ing between Dublin and London continued until 1907, when he moved to New York, where he lived in permanent exile until his death. He could not be persuaded to return. "To leave New York is to leave a huge fair where at any moment I might meet with some huge bit of luck," this Micawber-like prodigal father wrote. "Why do birds migrate? Looking for food—that's why I'm here." Eventually, his son worked out an agreement with the wealthy Irish-American lawyer and collector John Quinn whereby the poet sent him manuscripts and first editions and, in return, Quinn helped support the elder Yeats.

Alldritt memorably evokes one of the houses, 58 Eardsley Crescent in Earl's

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Court, where the Yeatses lived when the children were still under their parents' roof. In doing so, he brings out a strange bit of interaction between nineteenth-century England and America, with the twenty-two-year-old poet stuck in one of the dreariest corners of industrial England pondering a mythic Ireland in his own as-yet-unformed imagination:

> An end house in a stuccoed row in the debased classical style typical of mid-Victorian developments, their new home seemed to them even more squalid than the one at Terenure [a suburb of Dublin]. John Yeats himself described it as "old and dirty and dank and noisy," while Lily wrote that the house was "horrible" and the garden just a bit of sooty ground dirtied by cats. Like Terenure, this western edge of Kensington was a lower-middle-class suburb and clearly upsetting to the family of one who had once contemplated practising at the Dublin Bar. For the large Earl's Court Exhibition ground, which was very close to the house, gave to the area a fun-fair atmosphere and a noisy vulgarity. Steam organs blared out the music-hall songs of the day and at the time the Yeats family unenthusiastically moved in, Buffalo Bill and his Cowboy and Indian troupe were putting on shows that entailed whooping war cries and rattling gunfire. As the slender, bespectacled Willie went down into the underground station pondering his new project, a poem about Oisin, one of the noble heroes of ancient Ireland, he was met by crowds of working-class cockneys surging up from the steam-hauled trains, eager to cross the street to the Wild West Show.

The precariousness of his upbringing had profound implications for the values he arrived at in maturity. "If I had not been an unsuccessful & struggling man Willie & Jack would not have been so strenuous," John B. Yeats later mused in a letter to a friend. "—& Lily & Lollie? Perhaps they'd have been married like your daughter—a successful father is good for the daughters. For the sons it is another matter."

Yeats's mother comes across as a shadowy non-presence. She seems never to have quite recovered from the shock of marrying a man who proved himself incapable of supporting her in the style to which she was accustomed. In accounts of the Yeats household, she sits silent and resentful in the corner while her husband and her children argue passionately about the Pre-Raphaelites and Irish nationalism. After years of ill health and a series of strokes, she died in 1900, when Yeats was thirty-five. "She was prim and austere, suffered all in silence," Lily Yeats would later remark. "She asked no sympathy and gave none."

It is not difficult to imagine Yeats in this dreary London, dreaming of the country around Sligo he knew as a boy. In "The Trembling of the Veil" from his *Autobiographies*, he describes the inception of what remains his best-known poem, "The Lake Isle of Innisfree":

> I had still the ambition, formed in Sligo in my teens, of living in imitation of Thoreau on Innisfree, a little island in Lough Gill, and when walking through Fleet Street very homesick I heard a little tinkle of water and saw a fountain in a shop-window which balanced a little ball upon its jet, and began to remember lake water. From the sudden remembrance came my poem *Innisfree,* my first lyric with anything in its rhythm of my own music. I had begun to loosen rhythm as an escape from rhetoric and from that emotion of the crowd that rhetoric brings, but I only understood vaguely and occasionally that I must for my special purpose use nothing but the common syntax. A couple of years later I would not have written that first line with its conventional archaism—"Arise and go"—nor the inversion in the last stanza.

Since Yeats speaks of discovering the rhythm of his own music—and unfortunately for the student of meter, he never writes in technical terms about prosody—it might be instructive to scan the last stanza of that much-loved and over-quoted poem

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(I will use the *accent grave* to indicate secondary stress, partway between the accented and the unaccented syllable):

\ x x / x / \ x / x /
I will | arise | and go | now, for al|ways night |
x /
and day
x / / \ x / x x / /
I hear | lake wa|ter lap|ping with low | sounds
x x /
by | the shore;
x x / x x / \ x \ x
While I stand | on the | roadway, | or on | the
/ x /
pave|ments grey,
x / x x x / / /
I hear | it in | the deep | heart's core.

This is brilliant versification. Yeats usually adapted his verse forms from his reading, and he may have gleaned this stanza from one of the nineteenth-century Irish poets writing in English, like Mangan or Ferguson; its source is unknown to me. The stanza is made up of three six-beat (hexameter) lines, each divided by a strong medial caesura. The pause is signaled in lines one and three by a comma following a secondary stress (\); in line two the caesura is effected by the unstressed syllables of the second syllable of "lapping" and the unstressed preposition "with." The fourth line is tetrameter, in accordance with the common principle of rounding off a stanza by moving from a longer to a shorter line, as in the ballad or the Sapphic stanza. It is all comfortably iambic, counterpointed against contrasting rhythms. The lulling, watery feeling is reflected in several anapestic (x x /) phrases: "will arise," "by the shore," "while I stand," "in the deep." The poet's yearning is hammered home with emphatic spondaic phrases: "low sounds," "deep heart's core."

The metrical approach of other popular lyrics by Yeats in his Celtic Twilight mode is more conventional but no less beautiful. "Down by the Salley Gardens" contains fewer metrical surprises: an inverted, trochaic (/ x) foot at the beginning of the first line, where an iamb would be expected; and the occasional anapest throughout. A salley is a kind of willow. Here is the well-known eight-line poem in its entirety:

Down by the salley gardens my love and I
did meet;
She passed the salley gardens with little
snow-white feet.
She bid me take love easy, as the leaves grow
on the tree;
But I, being young and foolish, with her
would not agree.

In a field by the river my love and I did stand,
And on my leaning shoulder she laid her
snow-white hand.
She bid me take life easy, as the grass grows
on the weirs;
But I was young and foolish, and now am full
of tears.

Though the long lines, as printed, contain six beats apiece, each divides naturally into two units of three beats each. The poem reads aloud like a ballad in four stanzas rhyming *abcb*, differing from the usual ballad stanza only by virtue of having three beats in the first and third lines of each stanza rather than the usual four. It is utterly lovely and utterly conventional.

As an artist, Yeats was restless; he was also proud, and it annoyed him that lesser poets imitated his early work, turning it into an Edwardian period style. Later, well into the new century, he published the following quatrain, titled "To a Poet, Who Would Have Me Praise Certain Bad Poets, Imitators of His and Mine":

You say, as I have often given tongue
In praise of what another's said or sung,
'Twere politic to do the like by these;
But was there ever dog that praised his fleas?

As early as 1904, fifteen years after "Down by the Salley Gardens" and eleven years later than "Innisfree," as part of the collection *In the Seven Woods* (a reference to the seven woods at Coole, Lady Augusta Gregory's

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estate), Yeats in "Adam's Curse" hit on the plain-spoken and forceful but still intensely musical form of expression that would evolve into his mature style. Here he abandons the shorter lines and four-line stanzas that typify his early, balladlike poems for pentameter couplets that owe something to eighteenth-century masters like Swift and Pope. He also—not surprisingly in a man on the verge of turning forty—abandons the languor of his early lyrics for the solid virtues of hard work:

> "Better go down upon your marrow-bones
> And scrub a kitchen pavement, or break stones
> Like an old pauper, in all kinds of weather;
> For to articulate sweet sounds together
> Is to work harder than all these, and yet
> Be thought an idler by the noisy set
> Of bankers, schoolmasters, and clergymen
> The martyrs call the world."

Fortunate in many things, Yeats was perhaps most fortunate in the friends he made. Published the year before his death, "The Municipal Gallery Revisited" memorializes several friends, but chief among them Lady Gregory, who was for fifty years the poet's patron, confidante, and fellow soldier in the struggle for an Irish theater, which in itself embodied the struggle to define the emerging nation. In the forceful rhetoric he learned to appreciate from his vacillating father, Yeats—in a rare self-congratulatory mood—celebrates his friendship with Lady Gregory and the third leg of the Abbey Theatre triumvirate, John Millington Synge:

> John Synge, I and Augusta Gregory, thought
> All that we did, all that we said or sang
> Must come from contact with the soil,
> from that
> Contact everything Antaeus-like grew strong.
> We three alone in modern times had brought
> Everything down to that sole test again,
> Dream of the noble and the beggar-man.

The poem continues:

> You that would judge me, do not judge alone
> This book or that, come to this hallowed
> place
> Where my friends' portraits hang and look
> thereon;
> Ireland's history in their lineaments trace;
> Think where man's glory most begins
> and ends,
> And say my glory was I had such friends.

What would have become of the penniless young poet without Lady Gregory (whom Foster, seized by a fit of political correctness, insists on referring to rather ludicrously as "Gregory"), one hates to speculate. From their meeting in 1896 on, she was an ally whose background was reassuringly familiar, in that she was an Irish Protestant, but exotic and exciting in that while Yeats had always been on the outside looking in, Lady Gregory was able to provide him with the aristocratic culture to which he was spiritually attuned. Coole was a haven where the malnourished young bohemian could be restored to health, with time to write, freed from the pressures of literary journalism. She became the mother he had never really had. He reciprocated by turning Coole Park into a symbol for the ordered, traditional life that represented for him an ideal organization of culture and society.

Yeats was undeniably an elitist and a snob. The first of these qualities seems to me, as it informed his views on art and society, a positive value. As to the latter, admirers of his poetry might be more inclined to regard it as a peccadillo than to recoil from it in horror. Yeats was prophetic in the alarm with which he viewed the Roman Catholic nativism that came to dominate the nationalist movement, culminating in the puritanism and censorship of Eamon de Valera's Ireland. Yeats had been among the earliest advocates of Home Rule, but as events moved inexorably toward independence he became, like his ally Synge, more and more an opponent of the merchants and priests who typified the Catholic Establishment.

In "September 1913" Yeats stirringly elegizes the Fenian John O'Leary, whom the

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British sentenced to six years of hard labor in the stone quarries of the Portland Prison on the south coast of England, then exiled from Ireland for fourteen years more. The poem contrasts the idealism of O'Leary, who died in 1907, to the venality of the emerging Catholic mercantile class which was coming to dominate Ireland:

> What need you, being come to sense,
> But fumble in a greasy till
> And add the halfpence to the pence
> And prayer to shivering prayer, until
> You have dried the marrow from the bone?
> For men were born to pray and save:
> Romantic Ireland's dead and gone,
> It's with O'Leary in the grave.

Foster sees Yeats's position as consistent with his spiritual and aesthetic leanings: "He was clear in his mind that [Catholic middle class] institutions represented the faith and assumptions of the majority of the country, and therefore enjoyed a legitimacy not possessed by their predecessors, but he was equally convinced that—for all the rhetoric of nationalist rectitude—they shared many values founded on the debased intellectual currency of Victorian materialism, and its denial of ancient tradition." As for Yeats's increasing love of country-house weekends and dinner parties in fashionable London houses as his fame grew, Foster takes an understanding approach: "snobbery is never simple, being founded on an insecurity that can be psychological as much as social; and preoccupation with family is a natural response to entering one's late forties childless, with the landmark figures of the last generation crumbling away."

Yeats's elitism was later to elevate eighteenth-century Anglo-Irish culture as an ideal and to focus on the great houses of the aristocracy as symbols not only of beauty but of a distinguished and fully integrated way of life. In making such claims for a class that came, beginning with the land agitation of the late nineteenth century, and increasingly during the Irish War of Independence and the civil war that followed, to be roundly despised and rejected, many of their houses put to the torch, Yeats was praising a living culture that embodied not what today would be called privilege, but responsibility, wisdom, and dedication. In two great companion poems, "Coole Park, 1929" and "Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931," composed in eight-line stanzas as monolithic and awe-inspiring as marble slabs, Yeats memorializes the life to which he had been introduced by Lady Gregory:

> Sound of a stick upon the floor, a sound
> From somebody that toils from chair to chair;
> Beloved books that famous hands have bound,
> Old marble heads, old pictures everywhere;
> Great rooms where travelled men and children found
> Content or joy; a last inheritor
> Where none has reigned that lacked a name and fame
> Or out of folly into folly came.
> (from "Coole Park and Ballylee")

Distinguished by an inimitable tone Yeats would call, in "The Fisherman," "as cold and passionate as the dawn," these monumental poems derive some of their power from being prophetic elegies. Yeats knew that the tradition he loved was coming to its end. He bade it, and his friend Augusta Gregory, who in his eyes embodied a tradition of patronage and *noblesse oblige,* farewell in some of the noblest lines ever written:

> Here, traveller, scholar, poet, take your stand
> When all those rooms and passages are gone,
> When nettles wave upon a shapeless mound
> And saplings root among the broken stone,
> And dedicate—eyes bent upon the ground,
> Back turned upon the brightness of the sun
> And all the sensuality of the shade—
> A moment's memory to that laurelled head.

His prophecy has proved accurate. The house at Coole was pulled down in 1941 and sold to a local farmer for the value of its stones. The lines quoted above are displayed behind Plexiglas for the visitor to Coole Park to contemplate.

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Complexity & contradiction: Virginia Woolf & George Eliot

by Brooke Allen

Writing of the life of Percy Bysshe Shelley in 1927, Virginia Woolf observed that "there are some stories which have to be retold by each generation, not that we have anything new to add to them, but because of some queer quality in them which makes them not only Shelley's story but our own." This has proved true for the lives of any number of great men and women over the past few centuries: it has been true for no one, perhaps, as much as for Virginia Woolf herself.

In the opening of her comprehensive new biography of Woolf, British scholar Hermione Lee lists a few first sentences of other Woolf biographies: "'Virginia Woolf was a Miss Stephen' 'Virginia Woolf was a sexually abused child: she was an incest survivor' 'Was Virginia Woolf "insane"?' 'Was Virginia Woolf mad?'"[1] Etcetera, etcetera. "What no longer seems possible," Lee writes, "is to start: 'Adeline Virginia Stephen was born on 25 January 1882.'"

Why not? Evidently because her life has come to stand for a great deal; it has become a heavily loaded symbol in the current dialogues over gender, class, madness, and marriage. The famously gifted, original, neurotic, courageous, difficult, and very imperfect human being she once was has disappeared, and in its place is a secular saint.

Ms. Lee points out that "all readers of Virginia Woolf's diaries (even those who have decided to dislike her) will feel an extraordinary sense of intimacy with the voice that is talking there. They will want to call her Virginia, and speak proprietorially about her life." This has proven to be so, to an extent that would have appalled the fastidious and publicity-shy novelist. Woolf's literary style, and the chatty, confidential skill with which she charmingly feminized the belletrist tradition of the previous generation, has long made readers feel they know her, while her beauty and vulnerability have made them feel protective toward her. It is possible to see similarities between the apotheosis of Woolf and the process of canonization that is currently taking place over Princess Diana, another beautiful and vulnerable, but not exactly saintly, woman.

Feminist critics and readers—and the cult of St. Virginia is due, above all, to the feminist revolution—have chosen to see in Woolf the kind of martyr-heroine that substantiates present-day dogmas about male and female relations. This version of Woolf portrays her as a frail woman who invited domination. She was a victim of sexual abuse—incest, even; she was oppressed by a patriarchal system personified by a devouring and controlling father; her unfortunate mental illness caused her to be further oppressed by "male" medicine and by a husband who jealously guarded her every move. To add insult to injury, this version has it, she continued to be victimized even

1 *Virginia Woolf*, by Hermione Lee; Knopf, 893 pages, $39.95.

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after her death by her nephew and biographer, Quentin Bell.

There are such layers of nonsense in this picture that it is difficult to know how to begin to scrape them away. First of all, to see Woolf as having been victimized by these men is to deny her the very considerable triumphs, both material and psychological, that her life represents. Woolf proved herself to be no victim but a tough and resourceful person who overcame the handicaps of her sex and her mental illness to a remarkable degree and carved out for herself a life of freedom, work, and friendship which would have been inconceivable to women a generation earlier. The sexual abuse so lovingly dwelt upon by today's critics, a shameful catalogue of offensive groping and fondling by her older half-brother, George Duckworth, was an unsavory fact which she confronted with unusual honesty; she was even able to joke about it with her sister Vanessa (also an object of George's ungoverned lust). The "male" medical treatment which Woolf received during her bouts of manic-depression was a failure not, surely, because of its gender but because the miracle of lithium had yet to be discovered. Yet the picture of Woolf as a defenseless woman imprisoned by a cabal of wicked, conniving, and incurably masculine doctors, Mariana in her moated grange, has appealed to those who seek metaphors for male domination and female oppression (or who have read a little too much Foucault). That Woolf herself did not see the situation in this light is testified to by the fact that when she fictionalized her experience in *Mrs. Dalloway* she made the sufferer a man.

The aspersions that have been cast by a generation of Woolf critics on Sir Leslie Stephen, Leonard Woolf, and Quentin Bell would have surprised and horrified Virginia Woolf, and rightly so. At their most extreme and destructive, commentators have agreed with Louise de Salvo's position, in *Virginia Woolf: The Impact of Childhood Sexual Abuse on Her Life and Work*, that "Virginia Stephen was raised in a household in which incest, sexual violence, and abusive behavior were a common, rather than a singular or rare occurrence, a family in which there is evidence that virtually all were involved in incest or violence or both." Others, while not expressing themselves quite so forcefully, have deplored the influence on the delicate Virginia of the possessive and repressive men in her life.

It is true that Woolf was repelled by heterosexual sex and frequently preferred women to men as companions. Vita Sackville-West described her, interestingly, as "curiously feminist: she dislikes possessiveness and love of domination in men. In fact she dislikes the quality of masculinity." Yet she was deeply attached to the men in her life, attached to them, and in many ways—whether her worshipers like it or not—dependent upon them.

There can be no doubt that Sir Leslie Stephen was a difficult father, but he was also a loving one. His relationship with his daughter—like the relationships of most parents and most children, it should be emphasized—was simultaneously destructive and enriching, and Virginia Woolf responded to his egotism with a combination of love and rage. As Hermione Lee intelligently observes, "Virginia wrote and rewrote her father all her life. She was in love with him, she was furious with him, she was like him, she never stopped arguing with him; and when she finally read Freud in 1939 she recognized exactly what he meant by 'ambivalence.'"

Stephen was emotionally voracious, demanding the attention, adoration, and servitude of all the women in his household: first his wife Julia, and then, after Julia's death, his stepdaughter Stella Duckworth and, to a rather lesser degree, his young daughters Vanessa and Virginia. If he had lived to ninety-six, Virginia Woolf wrote, "like other people one has known," she felt that "his life would have entirely ended mine. . . . No writing, no books;—inconceivable." This projection is probably true: not because her father wished her ill, or

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begrudged her success, but because an ego so powerful tends to allow room for no other such in its immediate vicinity. Had he lived longer, Stephen would probably have been very happy for his talented younger daughter to have had a nice literary career in his style and in his shadow, ending up, ideally, as his biographer.

A bossy paterfamilias, no better or worse than most. Yet Stephen has been portrayed in recent years as a veritable Mr. Barrett of Wimpole Street, a pattern of oppressive Victorian patriarchy. His detached and rather unsympathetic treatment of Virginia's retarded half-sister, Laura Stephen—a treatment normal, alas, for the period and never challenged by Virginia, either during her childhood or later—is used to add color and menace to the devilish picture. Even Hermione Lee, a fine critic and meticulous biographer, feels compelled to apologize for his excesses of "patriarchal" behavior. Indeed, one grows thoroughly sick of the word "patriarchy" before many pages of *Virginia Woolf* have gone by: Lee is by no means immune to the glamour of academic jargon, and she even resorts to the disgusting affectation of using parentheses between words, as in "(en)treaties."

To reduce Stephen to a catalogue of oppressive and patriarchal values is to paint a figure that would have been unrecognizable to his contemporaries or even to his family. Although he had settled into a crusty and pessimistic middle age by the time his youngest daughter knew him, he had been in his time a highly influential radical, a supporter of Irish independence, Church disestablishment, and parliamentary reform. "For some young men," writes Lee, "he paved the way (like his beloved Meredith, like Gissing or Samuel Butler . . .) for the intellectual revolutions of the next century."

Perhaps if we are to settle on any definitive portrait of Sir Leslie Stephen—at least insofar as he figures in the life of his daughter Virginia—it should be Virginia's own portrait of him as Mr. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*. Only the most unresponsive reader could feel the self-indulgence and bombast of Mr. Ramsay without also feeling the softness and the dependence, could respond to the anger in the portrait without divining the helpless love. Mr. Ramsay is a critical and mocking comment on Sir Leslie Stephen, but he is also a deeply affectionate one, and anyone who fails to recognize the fact must be so patently dense that he, or she, should not be allowed to claim the title of literary critic.

The late Quentin Bell, Virginia Woolf's much-loved nephew, enjoyed a privileged relationship with his aunt throughout his youth; after Leonard Woolf's death he probably remembered her better than any person still living. His *Virginia Woolf* (1972), intelligent and humane, affectionate but unsparing, is one of the great masterpieces of the genre; it was also considered the definitive Woolf biography until the appearance of Ms. Lee's. As such it inevitably came under fire as a phallocentric document from the feminist critics who seek to deliver their heroine from male hands. Hostile critics like Jane Marcus have railed against Bell, the obsolete sexist who, they contend, sought to define and misrepresent "their" Virginia. Bell was attacked for every even slightly unflattering thing he said about his aunt. He was attacked for the crime of being a man attempting to write about a woman. He committed the ultimate sin, though, when he stated that Virginia Woolf was not a feminist.

Well of course, that depends on just what your definition of feminism is, as any idiot should be able to figure out. Bell, coming from a different generation and tradition from his younger, largely American critics, probably adhered to the rather narrow notion that feminists are overtly political, strident, often mannish. Virginia Woolf did not attach her name to political causes; she was ambivalent about votes for women, and did not join the suffragist struggle; she was, in spite of her unconventional sex life, an intensely feminine person. A more catholic definition of feminism, one that would accept as both "feminist" and beneficial the

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great revolution that over the course of the last hundred and fifty years has allowed women the fundamental right to control their own lives and income, would have to classify Virginia Woolf not only as a feminist but as one of the most important feminists of our era: as the author of *A Room of One's Own* alone, she has exerted an unparalleled imaginative influence on feminist thought.

It is all a question of definition, and if the question were put to him, Quentin Bell would surely have agreed that if his aunt were not the first sort of feminist, she was most undoubtedly the second. However he might define "feminist," Bell wrote of his aunt with extraordinary grace and insight. He wrote with love, yet accepted that his aunt did not always behave in a lovable fashion. He included every wart, while painting a complete portrait in which the overwhelming impression was of singular beauty. Yet Woolf's self-proclaimed defenders cannot forgive Bell for having included any unattractive features at all. What could he know about her, anyway? He was only a man. How dare he claim to define, to "own," to criticize, their exalted Virginia?

Even Hermione Lee goes along with this school of thought.

> As they grew up, the [Bell] children conspired with their parents to create a family image of Virginia Woolf as the batty, playful, malicious, untrustworthy, eccentric genius. The letters between the children about Virginia always strike this note; it lingers on into Quentin Bell's biography, and has greatly influenced the British reading of her life.

There is a great deal of truth in this image, however, and nowhere in her 760-page biography does Lee really succeed in dislodging it. Virginia Woolf *was* playful, untrustworthy, and eccentric; it is what makes her impossible to define and pin down, as current feminist critics would so much like to do. She was also, beyond any doubt, snobbish and malicious. Were she by some magic able to come back to life, there can be no doubt that among the first victims of her snobbery and her malice would be the earnest and political academics who claim her for their own.

The third perceived maleficent male in Virginia Woolf's life was the one she cared for the most: her husband. It is my opinion after reading both Bell and Lee that Leonard Woolf was one of the most devoted and long-suffering husbands in history. Romantically in love with his wife, he agreed, shortly after marriage, with her decision that they forego sexual relations, which were intolerable to her. His assiduous care undoubtedly kept her out of mental institutions and allowed her to have a productive and creative life. He took pride in her talent and intellect and encouraged her to exercise them to the utmost; he suppressed his own ego, judging her work to be more important than his own. It is true that he pushed for a quiet life in the country when she would have preferred the excitement of London, and that he made clear his opinion that they had better not have children. But on balance Leonard must be seen as having been tremendously beneficial to his wife, a fact that her final letter to him bears out: "I want to tell you that you have given me complete happiness. . . . No one could have been so good as you have been."

Of course, it is possible to go overboard in praising this unconventional marriage. Lee pooh-poohs the idea that the Woolfs' marriage might have been lacking in some essential element, blaming "standard assumptions about what a full-blooded sexual life needed to consist of." Are these "standard assumptions" so very wrong, then? I don't think so. And I find the Woolfs' pseudo-sexual fantasy life, in which they took on the personae of cuddly animals, revolting. ("In their secret play Leonard was often the little stringy creature, the mongoose, the 'Servant,' and she was the big mandril, goddess or mistress." Ugh! These, like so many revelations about the sex lives of the Bloomsburyites, are details that posterity could well have lived without.)

Still, whatever their initial motivations

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might have been, Leonard and Virginia chose each other and stood by their choice unwaveringly. They tried, as Lee points out, to reshape the possibilities of marriage, and to a large extent they succeeded. For Leonard to be calumniated as a parasite feeding on his wife's genius, a domestic tyrant who controlled her every move and kept her in an emotional prison, is a libelous disgrace.

The truth is that critics like Jane Marcus and Elaine Showalter seem unable to accept the fact that Virginia Woolf decided to marry and to place herself in a position of considerable emotional dependency upon a man. The fact that a woman who so passionately sought independence on one level while shrinking from it on another seems too hard for the literal-minded, who expect their heroes never to behave unheroically, to stretch their imaginations around.

The process of canonization of St. Virginia has turned Woolf into an untouchable figure she was not and could never be, and has obscured the imperfect and vastly more interesting reality. She was a powerful, important, and revolutionary writer but not, in my opinion, one of the very greatest. Her dislike for the vulgarity she perceived on first reading the manuscript of *Ulysses* indicates her own great failing, for an artist who is afraid of being vulgar will always be handicapped. Her avoidance of vulgarity led her too often to vulgarity's opposite, and far more serious, sins: preciosity and fancy. Her recognition, however, of Joyce's "showoffishness" indicates one of her own strengths: she did not use her work for ostentation; she undertook her literary experiments with a sincere desire to achieve new effects, to translate the immediacy of experience to the page more exactly than had ever been done before. She was the author of a masterpiece of art, *To the Lighthouse*, and a masterpiece of polemic, *A Room of One's Own*; an excellent but not wholly successful novel, *Mrs. Dalloway*; and a number of interesting but not immortal experimental novels. She was also indisputably one of the greatest literary critics of the last two centuries. Her essays are as fresh and as pertinent as they were when she wrote them, although some of her judgments—as, for example, those on Arnold Bennett and H. G. Wells—are accepted too religiously. As a critic, she was always far wiser than her own critics have been about her.

In her literary criticism, Virginia Woolf was one of the first, and most important, to take full measure of a writer whose posthumous career bears curious similarities to Woolf's own: George Eliot. Many critics before Woolf, of course, had taken the measure of George Eliot, but Woolf looked at her from the point of view of a woman experiencing the feminine essence of the work, and in that sense she broke new ground. Woolf saw in Eliot's heroines the story of Eliot herself:

> Thus we behold her, a memorable figure, inordinately praised and shrinking from her fame, despondent, reserved, shuddering back into the arms of love as if there alone were satisfaction and, it might be, justification, at the same time reaching out with "a fastidious yet hungry ambition" for all that life could offer the free and inquiring mind and confronting her feminine aspirations with the real world of men. Triumphant was the issue for her, whatever it may have been for her creations.

"Shrinking back into the arms of love": an odd phrase to apply a spirit as independent as George Eliot's is perceived to have been, but a true one nevertheless. Eliot, like Woolf, was a woman unusually dependent on her male partner in life, and, as with Woolf, feminist scholars have found it hard to forgive her for it.

Rosemary Ashton's new biography of Eliot [2] gives an intelligent and balanced account of a life rife with contradiction:

> The distinctiveness of George Eliot's life—the

2 *George Eliot: A Life*, by Rosemary Ashton; Penguin, 465 pages, $32.95.

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> particular turns it took, the successive milieus she inhabited, the shock waves caused in respectable, orthodox social circles by some of her actions—needs to be stressed. Nowadays few bat an eyelid at young people, and young women in particular, professing no religious faith, pursuing studies and careers in bedsits, living with men to whom they are not legally married. Marian Evans did all these things, yet as others observed of her, and as she herself recognized, her temperament was at bottom one which sought approval and desired to conform. Herbert Spencer saw that though intellectually she threw off her early beliefs, religious and political, "her natural feeling was a longing to agree as far as possible."

Every circumstance of Eliot's life bears out this interpretation of her character. When her father turned her out of the house after she rejected Church of England Christianity, she grieved, but gave not an inch. When she and George Henry Lewes, who was still married to another woman, set up house together, she faced the defection of her brother, Isaac, with sad resignation (the couple's frustrated love is movingly echoed in the troubled relationship of Tom and Maggie Tulliver in *The Mill on the Floss*), and she stoically endured a social ostracism she never sought. This ostracism was a sorrow to her for many years; in the end, however, she decided to interpret it as a blessing:

> For myself I prefer excommunication. I have no earthly thing that I care for, to gain by having been brought within the pale of people's personal attention, and I have many things to care for that I should lose—my freedom from petty worldly torments, commonly called pleasures, and that isolation which really keeps my charity warm instead of chilling it, as much contact with frivolous women would do.

Eliot, much like Virginia Woolf, dissociated herself from party politics; though she consistently allied herself with progressivism and reform, she was no radical, strongly disapproving of sudden or violent change. Again like Woolf, she was ambivalent about women's suffrage but passionate about women's education: she made a donation, for example, to the newly founded Girton College, but did not wish for her name to be linked with any cause—fearing, perhaps, that her scandalous reputation might do such causes more harm than good.

If one had to sum up George Eliot, one would have to conclude that she was not by nature unconventional—that is, she had no wish to flout convention—but that she was possessed of a personal honesty so fundamental and uncompromising that it forced her into an unconventional life whether she wanted one or not. Her refusal to pay lip service to organized religion (unconsciously hitting on the same phrase as her contemporary, Karl Marx, she stated that for herself it was best "to do without opium") or received morality (she considered her relationship with Lewes, whether or not it was ratified by law, to be a marriage) placed this upright, firmly moralistic woman in the absurd position of social renegade. A more unlikely renegade never lived.

"I think she is a highly feminine and attractive character," Virginia Woolf wrote to Lady Robert Cecil while researching the life of George Eliot for an essay in 1919, "—most impulsive and ill-balanced . . . and I only wish she had lived nowadays, and so been saved all that nonsense. I mean, being so serious, and digging up fossils, and all the rest of it." One might likewise wish that Woolf herself had been saved the obsessions of her own time—Freud and significant form and doctrinaire pacifism and obligatory sexual frankness—but the truth is that every age has its hobbyhorses. Woolf saw herself and her circle as having created something finer and better than Victorian society, and when Lytton Strachey, for example, called *The Voyage Out* "very, very unvictorian," he meant it as the ultimate compliment.

Woolf's statement that "On or about December, 1910, human character changed,"

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is perhaps her most frequently quoted *mot*. It is also the most ridiculous, for when has human nature ever changed? After a comparison of the lives and mores of Woolf's circle with that of Eliot, the only possible response is "plus ça change. . . ." Woolf did not see it that way: pondering the unlikely friendship between Clive Bell and Duncan Grant, she felt that her own generation, "with the truthtelling mechanism at hand," dealt with love and marriage far better than their Victorian parents had done.

But one wonders! Take Virginia's sister, Vanessa Bell. Her marriage to Clive Bell was for years what we would nowadays call "open," and eventually they went their more or less separate ways, Vanessa setting up house with the painter Duncan Grant. Though Grant gave her a child, Angelica (who was told that Clive Bell was in fact her father), he remained a homosexual, retaining his lover, "Bunny" Garnett, as a part of the household. Standing by the bassinet of the newborn Angelica, Bunny Garnett said that he would probably end up marrying the little girl, as indeed he eventually did. Anyone inclined to celebrate the unconventional freedom of the Bell/Grant/Garnett household is invited to read Angelica Garnett's memoir, *Deceived by Kindness*, which paints a grim picture of her childhood and its perpetual aura of lies and secrets. Vanessa Bell rejected her own mother's scenario of domestic slavery, the "angel in the house" image, only to repeat the pattern in an even more self-destructive guise.

And what about those staid Victorians, anyway? George Eliot's own life should serve as an antidote to that stale cliché. Estranged from her pious father, the agnostic Marian Evans moved to London and began work on the *Westminster Review*, taking lodgings with John Chapman, the *Review*'s twenty-nine-year-old editor. Chapman's menage consisted of himself; his wife Susanna, fourteen years older than himself; their children; and the children's governess, Elisabeth Tilley, Chapman's mistress and accepted as such by his wife. It was not long before the energetic Chapman began paying attentions to his brilliant young lodger; this proved too much for wife and mistress, who successfully joined forces and booted the intruder out. Chapman's journal records the scene.

> M. departed today, I accompanied her to the railway. She was very sad, and hence made me feel so. She pressed me for some intimation of the state of my feelings,—(I told her that I felt great affection for her, but that I loved E. and S. also, though each in a different way.) At this avowal she burst into tears. I tried to comfort her, and reminded her of the dear friends and pleasant home she was returning to,—but the train whirled her away very very sad.

This was pure farce, though not, perhaps, appreciated as such by Marian Evans/George Eliot herself until she was safely embarked on her relationship with Lewes. Although Lewes and Eliot were never legally married, the relationship was a marriage and more than a marriage, distinguished by daily routine, mutual fidelity, and each partner's infinite pleasure and comfort in the other's company. But again, how very unusual were the circumstances of the "marriage," and how roundly they contradict twentieth-century stereotypes about the Victorians—stereotypes largely invented and propagated by Woolf and her circle.

Lewes was not free to marry Marian Evans because he was already married, to Agnes Jervis. Lewes and Agnes had for some time agreed to conduct independent sex lives, and Agnes had by the time of Marian's appearance on the scene two children by the impecunious publisher Thornton Hunt; they were eventually to produce a total of four. The generous Lewes, almost as a matter of course, supported these four children as well as his own three throughout his life, and paid a regular stipend to the errant Agnes as well, an obligation that George Eliot would take on after Lewes's death. It became such an accepted arrangement that when one month Agnes overspent her allowance and Lewes

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remonstrated, Hunt sent him a challenge. "There is something ludicrous in the extravagance of this," Lewes wrote; "A challenge from him to me, & on such grounds!"

As we examine the life of George Eliot, it becomes clear how lucky and wise she was in her choice of a life partner. Lewes was an extraordinarily kind, capable, and affectionate man, "a man of heart and conscience," as Eliot described him, "wearing a mask of flippancy." Without being a genius in any one field, he was wonderfully facile at many, and wrote on history, science, philosophy, literature, psychology, and the theater with almost equal ease; he was a first-rate editor, and a popularizer of any number of subjects. At the time he and Eliot became lovers he was, unlike her, emotionally sophisticated and sexually experienced. He shared her philosophy without having come by it in the same tortuous fashion: "There is no evidence," writes Ashton, "that he had ever held a religious belief." He was vigorous, affectionate, easily amused: the depressive Eliot could not have hit on a husband who could better complement and enliven her habitually low spirits. The woman who had always believed herself to be "a negation of all that finds love and esteem" found herself loved unconditionally; the writer who had an exaggerated fear of criticism and bad reviews was shielded from them for the rest of Lewes's life.

Lewes, needless to say, has earned a good deal of posthumous criticism for his habit of hiding unpleasant reviews from Eliot. Perhaps, it is said, she might have profited from these reviews to have become an even greater artist. But it is safe to say that Lewes, who over and above all his other qualities was possessed of unusual common sense, knew his companion better than we, and that his course of action was designed to encourage the consistently high quality of her work rather than to let her settle for mediocrity.

Eliot then, like Virginia Woolf, was a women of remarkable intellectual dependence who lived in a state of intense emotional dependence upon a man. As such she has always been a troubling figure to feminist critics, and her work is as troubling as her life. It is felt that Eliot's heroines are not rebellious enough; they do not challenge patriarchal society sufficiently. In truth, the gap between what Eliot was and what these critics would like her to be lies in her larger intelligence, her superior ability to grasp complexities and contradictions. Victorian culture was more than a mere "patriarchal society", its power structure less rigidly hierarchical than appearances might indicate.

Eliot was a realist, not a fantasist; if her heroines often fail to liberate themselves from the nets they fall into, it is because so many of the real women she observed also failed, and Eliot had no wish to substitute doctrine, or wishful thinking, for truth. Great novels tend to be too slippery to squeeze into any preconceived political mold, and for over a century now George Eliot, like Virginia Woolf, has consistently proved greater than the critics who seek to define her.

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Three poems
by Donald Hall

The gallery

Back home from the grave,
behind my desk I made
a gallery of Janes:
at twenty-four, with long
straight hair sitting
beside me in my Pittsburgh
Pirate suit; standing
recessive in shadow
wearing her near-sighted
glasses, Kearsarge behind us;
stretched out glamorous
in her bathing suit
at Key West; foxy
and beautiful at forty-five;
embracing me last year;
front page of the Sunday
Concord Monitor
in color with headline:
POET JANE KENYON DIES
AT HER HOME IN WILMOT.

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After nine months

I grew heavy through summer and autumn
and now I bear your death. I feed her,
bathe her, rock her, and change her diapers.
She lifts her small skull, trembling
and tentative. She smiles, spits up, shits
in a toilet, learns to read and multiply.
I watch her grow, prosper, thrive.
She is the darling of her mother's old age.

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Independence Day

for Jane Kenyon

Five A.M., the Fourth of July.
I walk by Eagle Pond with the dog,
wearing my leather coat
against the clear early chill,
looking at water lilies that clutch
cool yellow fists together,
as I undertake another day
twelve weeks after the Tuesday
we learned that you would die.

This afternoon I'll pay bills
and write a friend about her book
and watch Red Sox baseball.
I'll walk Gussie again.
I'll microwave some Stouffer's.
A woman will drive from Bristol
to examine your mother's Ford
parked beside your Saab
in the dead women's used car lot.

Tonight the Andover fireworks
will have to go on without me
as I go to bed early, reading
The Man Without Qualities
with insufficient attention
because I keep watching you die.
Tomorrow I will wake at five
to the tenth Wednesday
after the Wednesday we buried you.

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Theater

Gruesome twosome

by Mark Steyn

It's one of the more curious trends of the day that musicals, which were once brash and vulgar, and full of slick presentational choreography, are now austere stately bores like *Titanic*; on the other hand, straight plays, in contrast to the restraint of their lyric neighbors, are frequently brash, vulgar and full of slick presentational choreography. Whether this inversion is in the interest of either form is debatable. Take, for example, *More Stately Mansions*, "by Eugene O'Neill"—though the production is enough to make you wonder. At the New York Theatre Workshop, Ivo van Hove's staging of this triangular tale of mother, son, and wife begins each act with the three principals solemnly entering and forming themselves into . . . a triangle. The numbing vaudevillian obviousness of the gesture is enough to make you groan. Yes, O'Neill's play is about a triangle, but that doesn't narrow it down much more than saying it's about people, people who need people. There is certainly an argument to be made for non-naturalistic, stylized storytelling—especially with O'Neill—and, if you take that route, then you're as well to declare your dramatic vocabulary early on. To his credit, unlike many contemporary directors of plays and musicals, van Hove maintains a consistent staging language throughout the evening. But that doesn't mitigate against his glib and generic opening: it's the equivalent of a chorines' kickline; it says no more than, "Here we go again."

More Stately Mansions belongs to a projected cycle of plays begun by O'Neill in the Thirties, chronicling the fortunes of two families—the Wasp Harfords, the Irish Melodys—across a century of New England life. There were supposed to be eleven plays. In the end, O'Neill cracked the backs of maybe four of them, of which only *A Touch of the Poet* was ever truly finished. In 1943, he gave up on the cycle and burned everything except *Poet* and its sequel, *More Stately Mansions*, on which he nevertheless wrote: "Unfinished work. This script to be destroyed in case of my death!" That's not quite as clear-cut as it seems, though at the Broadway premiere in 1967 most critics were irked by the decision to produce the play at all. Whether you agree or disagree, O'Neill's view of "this script" is indisputable: it's not a finished play.

Mansions begins in 1837, more or less where *Poet* leaves off. Sara, daughter of the village tavern-keeper Con Melody, has now married Simon, a big-city Harford forced against his idealistic but feeble will into his late father's business. The third point of the triangle is Simon's ferociously unyielding, manipulative mother. It is, in its way, as dark a view of family pathology as *Long Day's Journey into Night*. But it's a much wilder howl of a work, lashing out in all directions and then turning back in on itself. At one level, it couldn't be clearer: a man caught between a brainy schemer of a mother and an emotional pragmatist of a

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wife. But the triangle and its relationships keep shifting and blurring in what's not so much a narrative as a succession of ever more intense and frustrating confrontations. A wordy, unwieldy sprawl, O'Neill's script was eventually compressed by Karl Ragnar Gierow, after five years' work, into a brisk four and a half hours or so for a Stockholm production in 1962. With another hour shaved off, that's more or less the version being used here.

I have a mild objection to producing this play at all. At a time when the core of O'Neill's *oeuvre* has been virtually banished from New York and his presence in the living theater is little more than the name above the marquee for Lucy "Xena the Warrior Princess" Lawless in *Grease*, it seems perverse, even in a novelty-crazed age, to imply that *Anna Christie*, *Strange Interlude*, *Mourning Becomes Electra*, *The Iceman*, and *Long Day's Journey* are all so wearily familiar that we're forced to go scavenging around on the fringes of his catalogue. I'd prefer a grand revival of *Interlude* or *Mourning*, both of which foreshadow the themes of *Mansions*. But, if this script is worth dusting off, then we ought to accept its challenge. Read on the page, it seems to take as much time as five or six plays: it's confused, tortured, rambling, despairing . . . and compulsive. But it's not an O'Neill play, not yet. It's a huge crude lump which he never got around to musicalizing: the paragraphs are long, but they don't *sing* like O'Neill.

What then do you do with a text that isn't ready? There's a moment in van Hove's staging which sums up his approach. Simon, played by Tim Hopper, wallows in agony over his great unwritten book—the usual utopian hooey, Rousseau good, Andrew Jackson bad, etc. And, as the words tumble out of him on and on—idealism, materialism, any old -ism—Sara, athletically played by Jenny Bacon and writhing all over him, finally has had enough: she clamps her hand over his mouth and shuts him up. It's oddly reminiscent of the scene in *My Fair Lady* where Eliza declares that she's "sick of words" and demands instead that Freddie "Show Me"—and you're suddenly aware of the paradox at the heart of the piece: a musical about words.

When Sara signifies that she, too, is sick of words, the audience laughs—as well it should. For the gesture is a kind of signature for the production: throughout the evening, it seems that van Hove has been trying to devise ways to shut O'Neill up. Hopper, Miss Bacon, and Joan MacIntosh, as Simon's mother Deborah, lurch abruptly into different vocal pitches and timbres—one minute, bold, basso, and declamatory; the next, squealing in baby-talk falsetto—which presumably represent the conflicting sides of their characters. Deborah especially is driven by a restless spirit deep within; that, we gather, is why she gabbles her speeches at an unintelligible gallop. For much of the rest of the time, the characters talk over each other's words.

When he's not hurrying the text, overlapping it, ratcheting it up and down the octaves, van Hove prefers to just sidestep it. The strongest image of the production is, in effect, an interpolation. After Simon has been defeated by both his wife and his mother, he's reborn as a lusty buccaneer. He strips Sara of her simple black garb and arranges her nude form like a parody sex object. Naked, they throw each other around the room with an impressively muscular carnality. No director worth his salt could do that and then fail to imbue the play's other relationship with its own Oedipal eroticism: in the production's second strongest image, Simon's mother leans over her son and shows him her breasts. In between these high points, the principals crawl like slugs, knead their flesh, and make masturbatory gestures. As far as the latter's concerned, you may feel like joining in.

As with trite choreographic effects, there is a flashy bravura about these clapped-out routines that can be exhilarating. But most of them feel like the kind of early rehearsal exercises that, however useful for the actors, shouldn't really wind up in the finished play. The cumulative price for putting them in is

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that the evening comes to seem like a Freudian mime played out by grim archetypes; O'Neill's words are reduced to the status of background score. You can sympathize with van Hove's impatience with the text: the original Broadway production was, after all, dismissed by William Goldman as "the butt-numbing drama of the season." But, in 1967, what could Jose Quintero do about it? Ingrid Bergman wasn't going to bare her breasts, nor Colleen Dewhurst gambol naked. Van Hove's solutions have a tired sensationalism which keeps the play relentlessly on the surface. What's needed, if *More Stately Mansions* is to have any place in the repertoire, is for someone to take O'Neill's draft to the next stage—to distill and lyricize it into an O'Neill play. I don't think it any coincidence that, to date, the play has been a hit in Sweden and, in this latest production, in the Netherlands. In Scandinavia and the Low Countries, the natives have a fluency in English that puts most American high-school graduates to shame. But, if you'll forgive a racist generalization (and I speak as a semi-Belgian anyway), theirs is a peculiarly sterile form of English, stripped of all the rhythm and color of the real thing. That may be why these directors haven't spotted that what they're passing off as an O'Neill text is actually no such thing.

At the New York Theatre Workshop, an American cast, unwittingly or otherwise, is bound to acknowledge such defects. Tim Hopper, Jenny Bacon, and Joan MacIntosh are all fine actors and pleasant to see without their clothes on. But, floundering for a consistent style, they never quite cohere into an ensemble. Only Miss Bacon as Sara seems to find an emotional arc for her character, embracing both O'Neill's words and van Hove's gymnastics. Yet, despite all the director's artfully posed triangles, her performance seems, for most of the time, a beleaguered solo turn.

Meanwhile, far away from Eugene O'Neill, the Broadway season proper got under way with *Side Show*, a musical about Siamese twins. Cole Porter, in *Paris* (1928), told us that "folks in Siam do it/ Think of Siamese twins," but thinking about it was all we could do: he didn't *show* us. Even on Broadway, where everyone pretends to be fighting vainly the old ennui, it's hard not to get excited about all-singing, all-dancing, all-Siamese twins. This isn't some furtive little toe-curler lurking off-off-off-off-Broadway: it's right there on the Main Stem, at the Richard Rodgers, a show for all the family, and the matinee ladies and the tired businessmen and the bridge-and-tunnel crowd. And why not? A musical about Siamese twins isn't, in theory, any sillier than one about cats or in any more dubious taste than one about the *Titanic*.

The twins in question are Daisy and Violet Hilton, two real-life English sisters joined at the hip who had some success in American show business. The publicity for the production, and most of the resulting press, says they became vaudeville stars in the Thirties. In fact, they were at their peak in the Twenties. The Keith Circuit had turned them down, but Marcus Loew signed them and, in 1925, booked them in Newark, where they broke all records with a thirty-six-thousand-dollar house; Daisy and Violet's share was twenty-five hundred. I'm not just splitting hairs about the dates: they flourished in the last gasp of a pre-electronic culture; radio, movies, and TV offered a more placid surface—and different kinds of celebrity misfits. So the twins' career climaxed, as *Side Show* does, with an appearance in Tod Browning's 1932 film *Freaks*. Browning and his movie are presented in the show as just two more exploiters, but, with hindsight, *Freaks*, which flopped at the time and has been mostly banned since, seems less an act of exploitation than an indictment of attractiveness—and, on that score, rather more effective than *Side Show*.

The musical came about when Robert Longbottom, the director/choreographer, called Bill Russell, the librettist. "I saw this terrible movie on TV," he said, "*Chained for Life*, starring real-life Siamese twins. We have to do a show." That's a straightforward

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enough response: my God, what a terrible camp movie; it's gotta be a musical! Since then, naturally, they've decided to invest their story with a Larger Significance. Bill Russell says he can relate to the twins because, growing up in Wyoming, he, too, was an outcast: "My father was a cowboy. I was gay. I loved the theater. There was none." Henry Krieger, the composer, says he can relate to the twins because he's overweight: "Society tells you that fat is ugly, a body shape like that is bad, and you are an outcast. I am no stranger to that."

Steady on, guys. According to recent statistics, half the population of the United States is overweight. And most of the rest is gay. Surely, it's svelte heterosexuals who are the oddballs. But, in any case, all this identification—the quest for metaphor, for Larger Significance—is getting out of hand: as with Tom Cruise, Fran Drescher, and the rest of the gang who rushed to call up the Princess Di specials to bleat that they, too, had been stalked and been in that tunnel, it's a way of saying, Hey, every story is really about *me*. It's not, you know. O.J. is really about O.J. The minute you say he's emblematic of this or that, you dishonor the victims.

Perhaps seventy years ago we were more honest about our fascinations. "Come look at the freaks/ Come gaze at the geeks," says the creepy carney boss, introducing us to his parade of attractions. And in those days maybe that was enough. The stark directness of that couplet is, alas, diluted as the song proceeds and Russell finds himself encumbered with that "-eek" rhyme scheme: "Come explore how they fascinate you/ Exasperate you/ For weeks." Also, they have the "best physiques" and they "flush your cheeks." As the opening number drones on, especially in Ken Jennings's emphatic snarl, it begins to sound more and more like a preposterous rhyming exercise. In a good song, the music and the words merge unobtrusively. Here, the convolutions of the lyrics merely point up the musical structure: as with the Siamese twins, you're all too aware of how they're joined. It's not impossible to make that "-eek" scheme work. One thinks of Astaire at his blithest, dancing "Cheek to Cheek," courtesy of Irving Berlin. Not only does his heart beat so that he can hardly speak, but also: "The cares that hang around me through the week/ Seem to vanish like a gambler's lucky streak." Beautiful. Unfortunately, like so many modern show scores, adrift in the twilight zone between Sondheim and soft rock, *Side Show* relies heavily on meandering recitativelike musical scenes that never quite break into song. That makes it very difficult to impose any lyric form on them.

But there's another miscalculation in Longbottom's staging. The show opens with a row of benches, on which the cast seats itself. In other words, who's watching whom? Who is the audience? And who are the freaks? Heigh-ho, it's an old bit of show-biz flimflam that's been used any number of times over the years. But its effect here is mostly self-destructive: the company is brought on in mufti, so that when we're introduced to the Reptile Man, Bearded Lady, Snake Girl, and Geek they seem perfectly normal—or, at any rate, perfectly normal fey Actors' Equity types. Longbottom and company are going to such elaborate lengths to display their humanity they're subverting their own play. Thus, we first see Violet and Daisy not as Siamese twins but as wholly detached actresses, Alice Ripley and Emily Skinner. This is a terrible error. If we're to understand their predicament, we have to try and imagine what it must be like never to be alone—when you're asleep, when you're taking a shower, when one of you wants to go to the beach and the other wants to take in a movie . . . Besides, it also weakens the scene in Act Two, when Terry, the small-time showman who's in love with Daisy, fantasizes about what it would be like to be with her . . . on her own. Daisy appears, upstage, and steps out: it's a liberating moment, even as it shrivels away and his dream ends. But why spoil it? Why telegraph it in the opening?

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Aside from its introduction of the company, the opening is off-handed, little more than boy-meets-girls. Terry is brought to the sideshow, sees the twins and tells them "You Deserve a Better Life/ No more worry, no more strife." (There's another tired rhyme: there would be no more "strife" if it wasn't for the fact that it's one of the few words that goes with "life.") Their boss offers him a private audience: "They might be convinced," he leers, "to display . . . their connection?" We're meant to deplore this, but it seems to me far more human to be curious about Siamese twins than to want to see, say, the late moppet JonBenet Ramsey caked in make-up. But by now *Side Show* has determined its role: it's going to afford the twins the protectiveness and dignity they were denied in life. As always in the new school of overwrought, ballad-heavy musical theater, feelings are never revealed, but they're sung about incessantly: "What are these feelings racing around inside?/ Will I explode if all of these thoughts collide?" The more feelings are trumpeted, the less anybody seems to feel anything.

Part of this problem is a structural one. Krieger and Russell divide their score between period pastiche, for the numbers sung by the girls as they progress from the midway ("When I'm by Your Side") to vaudeville ("We Share Everything"), and Krieger's own voice, an insipid elevator rock. "The majority of the sung-through score is contemporary," he says. "After all, emotions are contemporary, no matter what period they're set in." True. But the halves of his score, unlike the twins, never really connect. And, because the mock-vaudeville is more fun, it tends to make a bigger splash —as when a fellow performer gets engaged to Violet and sings "One Plus One Equals Three/ My baby, her sister and me." It's at times like these that Longbottom comes into his own, concocting bizarre symmetrical, three-legged versions of familiar dances.

Even so, in maintaining a division between these prop songs and the notey soliloquizing, Krieger and Russell are evading the responsibilities of a dramatic score. Jule Styne's music for *Gypsy*, which inhabits much the same terrain, has far greater consistency of style: it's never pastiche, but it's in a vaudevillian vernacular—and, for its purposes, raises it to the level of art. *Gypsy*'s magnificent finale—a nervous breakdown in song, and Broadway's answer to the Mad Scene from *Lucia Di Lammermoor*—derives its operatic impact in part because it starts off so *un*operatically, with just the familiar bump'n'grind of burlesque. That's what makes it so specific: it's *her* breakdown. By comparison, Krieger's music for the twins' soliloquies, though it aspires to the eerie and otherworldly, is all too often bland and general.

That's perhaps the oddest thing about the show: instead of a study in fascination, which would require a far more psychological composer, Krieger and Russell are working, underneath the schlock rock, from a conventional musical comedy blueprint. Oh, sure, Terry protests early on that he thinks "they're gruesome/ I've tried things but never a twosome." But Russell's heart isn't really in that sort of thing: pretty soon, we find out that Terry likes Daisy and Buddy likes Violet and, by the time they're mooting the possibility of a double wedding, the whole thing's in danger of heading toward the same multiple-nuptials finale as *Lady, Be Good!* Even their arguments are the traditional ones afflicting double-acts in any backstage drama: "I'd be fine without you!" The difference is that those silly plots were put over with a nudge and a wink; Krieger and Russell seem to mean this one. With fustian Lloyd Webber wannabes like *Jekyll and Hyde* and *The Scarlet Pimpernel* in town, *Side Show*, in all its earnest gaucheness, is part of the belated Briticization of the American musical. As to whether it will run, by Act Two, the group on my left had walked out, the group on my right was in tears, and I was wondering whether we'd ever get the answer to Daisy's question to her betrothed sister: "How will I get through your honeymoon?" We never did find out.

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Art

Musée Degas

by Karen Wilkin

If Edgar Degas hadn't made a single picture or modeled a single sculpture, he would still figure prominently in the history of nineteenth-century art as one of the most passionate, ambitious collectors of his generation. At his death in 1917, he owned more than five hundred paintings and drawings, and over five thousand prints—a special enthusiasm of his—by other artists, most of them acquired obsessively in his last years. He kept this vast hoard in his "musée," a special room in his studio-house, where the handful of visitors allowed to penetrate the rather prickly artist's privacy were privileged to view his most prized works, arranged on easels. Degas is supposed to have considered turning this private sanctum into a public museum, but the project remained unrealized. He continued to acquire pictures almost until the end of his life, even when he could no longer afford to do so comfortably, sometimes making complicated exchanges with dealers, trading examples of his own work for pictures that he coveted. For the most part, however, this enormous collection remained unknown, except by reputation, until after the artist's death. It took eight separate auction sales, organized jointly by the illustrious dealers Bernheim-Jeune, Durand-Ruel, and Ambroise Vollard, held in Paris during 1918 and 1919, to dispose of Degas's immense holdings—sales attended by curators of London's National Gallery, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Louvre, along with a gang of eager private collectors and art dealers.

Even more remarkable than the size of Degas's collection was the breadth of his taste. He acquired, apparently with equal appetite and certainly equally acute judgment, paintings by old masters, Japanese prints, canvases and drawings by the nineteenth-century masters who most inspired him, lithographs by popular illustrators of his own time, works by his friends and contemporaries, and, what is most surprising, by his juniors. He kept for his planned museum, as well, a staggering number of his own paintings and pastels from every part of his career. (The enormous quantities of drawings, graphic works, and "secret" sculptures found in Degas's studio after his death were apparently not intended for the museum; the painter is supposed to have instructed one of his heirs to destroy the countless working drawings and studies accumulated during his lifetime of making art, but fortunately, the request was ignored, so that most of this material was auctioned with the rest of the estate.)

In the spring of 1996, as a footnote to the initial showing of *Degas: Beyond Impressionism* (the excellent exhibition of the artist's late work seen subsequently at the Art Institute of Chicago), the National Gallery, London, mounted a miniature survey of Degas's legendary collection, forty-six key examples ranging from old-master canvases to works by the artists with whom Degas

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exhibited—Pissarro, Sisley, Cassatt, Morisot, Cézanne, and Manet—plus a few of the artist's more unexpected acquisitions. Even this tantalizing fraction of the collection was fascinating and impressive, while the accompanying catalogue, which reproduced many other extraordinary works once owned by Degas, made you long for an expanded version of the show. This fall those longings have been gratified by a much more complete survey, "The Private Collection of Edgar Degas," at the Metropolitan.[1]

At slightly more than three hundred works, it represents only a small portion of the collection (the Paris sales included about eight thousand items, more than three thousand of them by Degas himself), but the selection provides vivid evidence of the scope and size of the artist's lovingly accumulated holdings. The curators have done some inspired sleuthing, unearthing collection stamps that unequivocally identify works as having belonged to Degas from underneath mats and frames, identifying pictures known only from not very accurate descriptions and sales records (there's still disagreement about one of the exhibited canvases), and as a last resort, providing alternative examples for prints known to have been in the collection when the specific impression owned by Degas couldn't be located. The show reunites many works that haven't been together since they were last in the painter's *musée*, although regrettably, a fair number of the most spectacular pieces included in the London mini-show didn't come to New York, most of them replaced by equivalents or near-equivalents from this side of the Atlantic. It's some compensation that the Met has added a wonderful section devoted to the Degases that the artist kept for himself—which is not to say that the absent pictures aren't missed. The show is breathtaking. The pitiless eye and ferocious visual intelligence that made Degas Degas—the brilliant draughtsman, bold colorist, and keen observer who radically transformed form, content, and method in both two and three dimensions—also made him a collector of astonishing discernment. Picture after picture at the Met stops you in your tracks not because it seems absolutely typical of the artist who painted it (though many do), not because of what it suggests about Degas (though obvious connections exist), but simply because it is such a superb picture.

Many of Degas's most prized possessions are familiar, since they now enrich museums everywhere. Many of the works exhibited in London, in fact, were drawn from the National Gallery's acquisitions from the auctions of the artist's estate. The Metropolitan was the only American institution to make purchases from these sales, but a surprising number of stellar works now in museums throughout this country turn out to have once been owned by Degas: our National Gallery's glowing red, blue, and gold El Greco, *St. Ildefonso* (c. 1603–14); the Metropolitan's dazzling Ingres portraits, *M. and Mme. Jacques-Louis Leblanc* (1823), the acquisition of which Degas described as "the event of my life as a collector"; the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts' severe Cézanne portrait, *Victor Chocquet* (1877); the Museum of Modern Art's broad-backed Gauguin nude, *The Moon and the Earth (Hina Tefatou)* (1893); and a great many important Impressionist and Post-Impressionist pictures in Chicago, Baltimore, Detriot, Boston, and elsewhere in the U.S. (A similar number of European museums can boast of significant works formerly in the collection, as well.)

The pictures that Degas chose to keep for his museum from among his own works are now equally celebrated and equally widely dispersed. They are some of his most pow-

1 "The Private Collection of Edgar Degas" opened at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, on October 1, 1997, and remains on view through January 11, 1998. A catalogue of the exhibition, by Ann Dumas, Colta Ives, Susan Alyson Stein, and Gary Tinterow, has been published by the Metropolitan Museum and distributed by Harry N. Abrams (368 pages, $60; $45 paper). A summary catalogue serving as a checklist of Degas's entire collection is also available (152 pages, $45; $35 paper).

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erful efforts, ranging from early, penetrating portraits of his family such as the Musée d'Orsay's *Bellili Family* (1858–67), and the Boston Museum of Fine Arts' *Monsieur and Madame Edmondo Morbilli* (c. 1865), to late masterpieces such as the Philadelphia Museum of Art's impossibly spiraling nude seen from the back, *After the Bath* (c. 1896), and the Basel Kunstmuseum's weird *Fallen Jockey* (c. 1896–98). Yet remarkable as this list of well-known pictures undoubtedly is, for every "famous work" once owned by Degas in the show at the Met, there are many others, equally fine, that come as a complete surprise: a wall of intimate Delacroix watercolors from his Moroccan journey in 1832, for example, that includes rarely seen gems, now divided among the Louvre, the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris, and some incredibly fortunate private collectors; there's a little interior of a Moroccan house, with a paneled door, a narrow window, and a tiled moorish archway, rendered in broad, pale washes with scribbled color notations, that's as economical and telling as any of Matisse's Moroccan canvases—which were, of course, homages to Delacroix.

In addition to the abundant aesthetic pleasures provided by individual works—justification enough for several visits—the show is also provocative on many other levels. It raises absorbing questions about the history of taste, specificially about how the art of both the late nineteenth century and the past was regarded by sophisticated observers in Degas's time, and how it is regarded now. It makes you consider the history of collecting, both public and private, in the early part of this century and today. But most important, the show makes you think in new ways about Degas, who requires a great deal of thinking about, as perhaps the most well known but most mysterious (and certainly the most contradictory) of modern masters. Confronted by works that this rigorous, self-critical artist selected for himself, it's impossible not to speculate about why he acquired what.

Sometimes it seems fairly obvious. It's hardly news that Degas the radical modernist was also a deeply conservative artist who revered both the paradigmatic, classicizing draughtsman, Ingres, and the paradigmatic Romantic painter, Delacroix. Degas's own work, with its clear echos of Ingres's incisive line and of Delacroix's sensuous color, makes it plain that he traced his descent from both these twin pillars of traditional nineteenth-century painting, so it's no surprise that both of them were well represented in his collection. Like a good curator, Degas shaped his holdings carefully. Not only did he acquire major canvases by both artists—by Ingres, the Met's portraits of the Leblancs, for example, plus another equally imposing male portrait now in the National Gallery, London, and by Delacroix, an early full-length portrait of a dandy—but he also amassed large numbers of their finest drawings, studies, and watercolors, many relating to some of their most celebrated pictures. Degas acquired, as well, some small versions of their most important themes, so that his selections as a group echoed the whole trajectory of each artist's development. The collection included, for example, drawings relating to Delacroix's decorations for the Palais-Bourbon, sketches relating to his *Liberty Leading the People*, and an intense little entombment, as brushy and richly hued as any of the master colorist's large-scale canvases. Degas's collection included, too, a host of Ingres's preparatory studies for *The Apotheosis of Homer*, for some of his best known portraits, plus small versions of the perfervid tableau in which Roger rescues Angelica from a sea monster and the creepy scene of a well-muscled nude Oedipus eye to eye with the sphinx, all surrogates for important works not within Degas's reach.

The didactic aspect of Degas's collection was obviously of great concern to him (he went to great trouble to obtain photographs of unavailable pictures by artists whose work he owned) but what becomes particularly visible in the Met's exhibition is how fascinated he was by images that revealed his chosen ancestors' process. The

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obvious, psychologically loaded inference is that Degas acquired what he did in order to possess the attributes of his distinguished predecessors, through a sophisticated kind of sympathetic magic: he would be able to paint and draw the way they did if he possessed images that showed them naked, at work. That's the sort of explanation you would find in certain kinds of pre-post-modernist critical biographies, but while no one would dispute the complexities of the collecting impulse (at least one recent study has declared it to be downright pathological), anyone who has ever spent time with serious painters and sculptors knows that they study—and if they can, live with—particular works of art by other artists for very specific and fairly straightforward reasons. They choose works that nourish their own art because they provide something that can be extracted and assimilated.

One simple, empirical answer to why Degas sought out the pictures that he did is that he found in them useful clues to how to achieve his own goals and confirmation of the significance of his own quest. As Ann Dumas, one of the curators of the Met's show and the organizer of the earlier exhibition in London, has pointed out, there are ample precedents for artist-collectors acquiring works that served them as inspiration—Rubens, for example, had a notable collection of old masters—but, she reminds us, Degas acquired most of his holdings at the end of his career, not at the beginning; nevertheless, Dumas notes that "his collecting of drawings of details can be seen as a continuation of his early practice of copying, which provided ideas for poses throughout his career."

The notes Degas made in his inventory, cited in the catalogue and displayed in the Met's installation, offer interesting information about his choices. Provenance mattered to him. He was especially pleased if a picture had belonged to another artist; he recorded, when he acquired El Greco's *St. Ildefonso*, that the picture "hung for a long time over Millet's bed." But what seems to have been primary, if you go on the evidence of the Met's show, were the merits of the individual work. An innovative printmaker himself, he owned large numbers of lithographs, a relatively new medium at the time, by the popular illustrators of the day, Daumier and Gavarni. Degas seems to have appreciated the way both artists could tell complicated stories about modern life in purely visual terms, almost exclusively through the actions of their protagonists. (It's worth remembering, in this connection, that for most of his life, Degas was principally a figure painter.) Daumier's ability to render telling poses and conjure up personality with a minimum of means—an assured, economical line and masses of black and white tone—was plainly appealing. In fact, Degas admired Daumier so much that he also owned several of his paintings and a great many of his drawings, an enthusiasm that he shared with Henry James, which suggests questions about possible similarities in the nature of narrative in Degas's images and James's novels.

Gavarni's prints were no less trenchant than Daumier's, although he was a slightly less expressive draughtsman, but Degas took his work very seriously; Gavarni, he thought, "knew about women." Interestingly, the Gavarni images at the Met, mostly from a series dealing with various categories of available women at the fringes of society, all show their female subjects with their heads turned away from the viewer. Their attitudes are at once reminiscent of the seated models in Corot's late studio interiors and the woman in Degas's most highly charged narrative picture, the enigmatic bedroom scene, sometimes identified as an image from the novel *Thérèse Raquin*, known variously as *Interior* or *The Rape* (c. 1868–69, Philadelphia Museum of Art)—a painting that Degas kept for his planned museum.

Sometimes friendship and proximity seem to have had something to do with what Degas acquired. He was close to Mary Cassatt and owned particularly good examples of her work in various media. Degas

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and Manet sustained a long and sometimes thorny friendship, united by similarities of class, ambition for their art, taste, and above all, deep admiration and regard for one another's work. The connection survived such moments of difficulty as the famous incident of Manet's cropping his wife's likeness out of Degas's double portrait of the couple—Degas was outraged, demanded the picture back, added a strip of canvas to replace the missing portion, and then left the picture as it was. (He also returned a still life Manet had given him.) But in the more than two decades that Degas lived on after Manet's premature death, he continued to acquire his friend's work. Degas eventually owned virtually all of Manet's graphic production, and a significant group of paintings, from a rapid, intimate portrait of Madame Manet with the family cat (named, the exhibition texts tell us, Zizi) to a cool, rather formal full-length portrait of a self-satisfied bourgeois in a garden, a vigorously brushed composition of lush green foliage, light-dappled path, and dapper gent, hands thrust into his natty blue coat pockets, that was inexplicably rejected by the sitter.

The most compelling of Degas's Manets at the Met is probably a fierce, savagely brushed portrait of Berthe Morisot in mourning. Degas's favorite is supposed to have been a shimmering pastel of Madame Manet reclining on a blue sofa, not simply, I suspect, because of his own fascination with the medium, but because of its audacious composition—a stripped-down, frontal structure with space implied only by minimal notes of shadow—and its barebones palette: luminous blue, gold, white, and a range of greys, punctuated with slivers of black. Perhaps Degas's most significant acquisition not at the Met was the remains of Manet's *The Execution of Maximilian* (c. 1867–68, National Gallery, London). Degas tracked down and reassembled four surviving fragments of the huge picture, which had been damaged, and, because of its condition, divided and dispersed by Manet's heirs after his death.

The links of friendship, sympathy, and esteem detailed in the catalogue's essays, such as the one on Degas and Manet by Mari Kálmán Meller and Juliet Wilson-Barreau, may help to explain why Degas acquired some of the works that he selected by his fellow artists, but it is obvious that aesthetic, rather than personal, considerations dominated his choices. Degas owned first-rate pictures by the most difficult of his contemporaries, Cézanne, even though their relationship, discussed by Richard Kendall, was barely cordial. That the fastidious Parisian Degas and the rough-hewn Provençal Cézanne never much liked each other personally is hardly surprising, given the differences in their personalities, their classes, and, you might think, their approaches to painting—at least superficially. But Degas acquired Cézanne's work in some depth, in various media, as was his habit, including the portrait of Choquet, a self-portrait, a gritty, uningratiating reclining Venus and Cupid, and a strange little *Bather with Outstretched Arms* (c. 1883, Jasper Johns). (The first and last of this list are on view at the Met.) It's a tribute to both the power of Cézanne's art and the discrimination of Degas's taste that the painter, who had virtually ignored still life as a subject throughout his career, also acquired four of his colleague's rigorous pictures of apples. Obviously, Degas grasped fully the deeply classical foundations of his colleague's art, the sense of underlying geometry and disciplined passion that both animates and orders Cézanne's work from first to last. Degas must have been aware, too, as he was with Manet, that Cézanne was one of the rare artists who met him at his own level, someone whose originality and pictorial intelligence challenged his own. Kendall's essay underscores these and other even more subtle connections between these two giants of early modernism and points out evidence of Cézanne's influence on Degas, particularly on his late work.

Degas's taste remained adventurous. His eye for the work of artists a generation younger and apparently with very different

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conceptions of what a picture could be was no less sure than it was for pictures by the masters he had revered from his own youth; witness his startling acquisition of works by Gauguin and Van Gogh. Degas's choice of Gauguin's pictures is particularly notable: among others, a lush Tahitian landscape now in the Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection, the massive standing nude in the Museum of Modern Art mentioned earlier, the economical *Woman of the Mango (Vahine no te vi)* (1892, Baltimore Museum of Art), and the hierarchical beach scene, *Day of the God (Mahana no atua)* (1894, Art Institute of Chicago)—although there is some doubt as to whether the last picture is really the one Degas owned. Degas was both a major fan and a major supporter of Gauguin. Not only was he one of the few buyers at the studio show the younger artist organized to raise money for his last sojourn in Tahiti, but he made enough purchases to almost singlehandedly finance the trip.

Images of the figure, not unexpectedly, made up the bulk of Degas's acquisitions, but the landscapes and still lifes he owned are frequently as compelling as any of his carefully chosen portraits, nudes, or genre scenes. At the Met, Degas's Pissarros range from a marvelous selection of etchings and acquatints to a wonderfully crisp, radiant view of the countryside near Pontoise. A couple of Delacroix's cloud studies, although modest, are among the most arresting pictures in the show, while a single rock-solid Corot, doing duty for many more of the painter's early works once owned by Degas, simply makes you wish for more.

In fact, despite the relatively large size of the show, despite the well-balanced profile of Degas's collection that it provides, I kept wishing for more throughout, not just for more of the acknowledged masterpieces that stud the exhibition, but for more private works that reveal glimpses into the elusive Degas's thinking—works by lesser known artists like the show's vigorous drawing by Forain; or the wholly unexpected little landscape panel by de Nittis; or the intimate, affectionately observed images of cats (and lions) by Delacroix and Manet. Most revealing, perhaps, of all the works Degas selected for his museum—both by others and by himself—are pictures that document one artist's probing study of another's efforts. Degas kept his own copies of pictures by Delacroix and Mantegna. He acquired a sheet of Delacroix's studies of heads after Goya and one of his oil copies after Rubens, several of Manet's etchings after Velázquez, and, perhaps most significantly, Gauguin's watercolor copy of Manet's *Olympia*, a picture that Degas apparently loved. It's almost possible to reconstruct Degas's sense of the history of art from these selections or, at least, his sense of the continuity and transformation of a tradition, through a kind of chain of admiration linking artist to artist: Gauguin copies Manet, Manet copies Velázquez, Degas copies Delacroix, Delacroix copies Rubens—art history on the hoof.

This wonderful show is accompanied by an eminently readable catalogue chock full of fascinating information, with essays by such experts on French nineteenth-century art and distinguished Degas scholars as Theodore Reff, Gary Tinterow, and Françoise Cachin, among others. Essays explore Degas's activity as a collector, in general, and in particular, his relationship to those artists whose work is most prominently represented in the collection, from "ancestors" such as Ingres and Delacroix, to contemporaries such as Manet, Cézanne, Daumier, and Gauguin. There is absorbing material on the estate sales, on critical reaction at the time, and, not surprisingly, on the Met's role at the auctions. It is all interesting and enlarges our understanding, but in the end, the most persuasive evidence is the art that Degas chose, evidence that serves to enhance the self-portrait provided by his own work. The well-selected survey of Degas as a collector at the Met sharpens our image of a complex, elusive individual, a dedicated modernist consciously linked with the past, possessor of an exacting eye and an unquenchable appetite for aesthetic challenge.

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A world without distinctions: Rauschenberg at the Guggenheim

by Mario Naves

Not long ago in these pages, Karen Wilkin described the standard history of American art as "freeze-dried." Rarely has a critic pointed up the confines of art historical discourse as pithily. Even the casual student of art knows what such a history entails, with its litany of movements and artists. It is one that extols novelty over aesthetics, style over vision, Barnett Newman over Fairfield Porter. It is a history that exalts an avant-garde, no matter how moribund, over the rigors of tradition. It is a history that has attempted to elevate Marcel Duchamp to a status equal to that of Picasso and Matisse and, for the most part, succeeded. It is a history as blah as it is blind—blind, that is, to the arts of painting and sculpture. Within this fast and flavorless telling of history Robert Rauschenberg plays a pivotal role.

As an art student, I first learned of Rauschenberg as the artist who erased a drawing by Willem de Kooning. This was not simply an audacious prank, we were told, but an undertaking of epic proportions. Reading what has been written about the artist in light of his retrospective, it becomes clear that this was but one of many such endeavors. Indeed, one marvels not just at the scope of Rauschenberg's artistic influence, but at how different life on earth would have been without him. Charles Stuckey writes in the exhibition catalogue, for instance, that the latter half of the twentieth century "might well be called the Rauschenberg era." In the September *Artforum*, the critic Dave Hickey imagines the 1950s and 1960s without Rauschenberg and finds an "immediate visual deficit." Others see him as a harbinger of Pop Art, performance art, neoexpressionism, postmodernism, and multiculturalism, as well as an icon of democratic goodwill. If comparisons are to be taken at face value, he can count among his peers Jefferson, Mozart, Giorgio Morandi, and Johannes Vermeer. Clearly, Rauschenberg is less an artist than a cultural tornado whose path has left no one and nothing untouched.

Robert Rauschenberg: A Retrospective includes some four hundred works, occupying the uptown and downtown Guggenheims and the cavernous Ace Gallery.[1] Rau-

1 "Robert Rauschenberg: A Retrospective" opened on September 19, 1997, and remains on view at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, through January 7, 1998; at the Guggenheim Museum SoHo through January 4, 1998; and at the Guggenheim Museum at Ace Gallery, New York, through November 9, 1997. The exhibition will travel to the Menil Collection, Contemporary Arts Museum, and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (February 13–May 17, 1998); Museum Ludwig, Cologne (June 27–October 11, 1998); and the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao (November 20, 1998–February 26, 1999). A catalogue of the exhibition, by Walter Hopps and Susan Davidson, has been published by the Guggenheim Museum and distributed by Harry N. Abrams (631 pages, $75, $45 paper).

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schenberg's role in postwar art is seen by many as being key and can be traced to his famously stated aspiration to work in the gap between art and life. Now, one is tempted to reply that there is a sound reason for this gap. Art and life are, after all, two very different things—no one ever died because of a bad drawing. Yet only someone oblivious to (or contemptuous of) the nuances of art would think that art and life don't inform each other. What has fascinated Rauschenberg throughout his career is not art as such, but art as culture and style. An oddly likable disciple of Duchamp, Rauschenberg celebrates the freedom implicit in the Dadaist aesthetic. In doing so, he helped bring it into the mainstream. This is his ultimate contribution to American culture: making anti-art safe for the masses. The question is whether the masses will be able to withstand such a gargantuan exhibition. Will it prove to be a blockbuster that busts—or, at least, sobers—even its most ardent admirers?

Rauschenberg's rise to infamy—and, of course, subsequent fame—is inextricably linked with Abstract Expressionism. The heyday of the New York School being before my time, I can only imagine the obstacle it must have been for young artists. In this milieu, Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953) must have seemed a refreshingly mischievous display of patricide. Yet, Rauschenberg's Duchampian riff on de Kooning wasn't completely nihilistic; it was suffused with a peculiar kind of admiration. (If he were a hardcore Dadaist, Rauschenberg could have, I suppose, *burned* de Kooning's drawing.) The smears, drips, and globs of paint in his work are meant, in part, as affectionate satires of the New York School; they are, if you will, compositional Band-Aids that stretch across his disparate images and objects. But satire had better inhabit the subject it seeks to deflate or else it's meaningless. This is where Rauschenberg falls flat. His appropriations of Ab Ex facture are, at best, cute and dated—the *Mad* magazine version of modern art. Consequently, the work is slick even at its grubbiest. Rauschenberg puts me in mind of no one so much as Leroy Neiman, another clever, proficient artist who uses Ab Ex means to achieve other ends.

One can still see traces of de Kooning's line in *Erased de Kooning Drawing*, one of the few works on view that can be classified, if just barely, as drawing. Rauschenberg is renowned for confounding established artistic categories. Little of his work can be called painting or sculpture without a sizable caveat. Starting roughly with his collagelike "Combines" of the Fifties, Rauschenberg set out to prove that (in his own words) "there's more to the world than paint." While one does come across mundane materials such as oil paint on canvas at the Guggenheims, one is also confronted with taxidermied goats, eagles, and chickens, pillows, a ventilation duct, paper bags, shoes, a unicycle, tar paper, a bathtub, stained and battered cardboard boxes, electronically controlled rotating Plexiglas disks, a bank of video screens, a BMW, a flashing viewer-activated environment, and a bubbling mud bath. This partial list only hints at the range of objects Rauschenberg has used in the service of his art. On this point, one must agree with his devotees: Rauschenberg is, indeed, an innovator.

But so what? While innovation can be a means of gaining notoriety, it is rarely a guaranty of good art. More often than not it is, in fact, a ruse for a dearth of inspiration. Rauschenberg's "anything goes" approach to art-making is, however, not without charm. Putting the Combines together must have been a hell of a lot of fun, and Rauschenberg's enthusiasm is palpable, if only in the early parts of the show. One can almost picture the light bulb flashing above his head as he tinkered with the idea of putting an actual window frame inside a canvas, as in *Trophy V (For Jasper Johns)* (1959). Yet enthusiasm doesn't—can't, really—carry the work alone. Rauschenberg is so preoccupied with expanding the parameters of art that he loses sight of what made them relevant in the first place. In doing so, he

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overwhelms the viewer. By pushing the envelope, he pushes us away. Rauschenberg denies art's capacity to evoke experience through illusion. His objects, call them what he will, only serve to make the viewer self-conscious. In an age of self-consciousness, this may mark him as an artist for our times. But isn't art supposed to enlarge our sense of self by allowing us, if only momentarily, to step out of it?

Despite its surfeit of imagery and materials, Rauschenberg's work is flimsy. No object or image is invested with gravity or presence, and he can't pull them together in a coherent manner. Or, rather, he connects them in a facile one. He does have a rudimentary sense of composition—did he learn about the grid from Josef Albers at Black Mountain College?—and an eye for juxtaposition. What is missing, however, is the imaginative leap of faith. (Comparisons to Joseph Cornell only bring home the point.) His is a talent altogether too breezy to spur thought or reflection. *Retroactive I* (1964), with its silk-screened images of JFK, an astronaut, and a crate full of apples, promises a kind of absurdist historical summation, but it is, basically, an illustration with arty touches. Rauschenberg attempts to capture the flux and pace of real time, yet all he can muster is the pictorial equivalent of channel surfing. The work is diverting in as much as one isn't compelled to look at it. This is particularly telling (and onerous) in the examples of work from the Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange project. No one can fault Rauschenberg for promoting world peace, but all he brought back from his travels, in terms of art, is lurid, ethnic kitsch. Faced with the world's diverse peoples, customs, and cultures, all the artist can find is himself.

By the time one winds through the funhouse ambience of the SoHo Guggenheim and the interminable installation at Ace Gallery, *The 1/4 Mile or 2 Furlong Piece* (1981–present), it has long become apparent that Rauschenberg is a victim of style—his own. This is the fate of stylists: once they've defined themselves there's nowhere left to go. The work on the second floor of the downtown museum is particularly rote. Although he has always employed a variety of materials and processes, Rauschenberg never actually experiments with them. Whether he is working with brass, mirrored aluminum, light boxes, vegetable-dye transfers, or frescoes, the results are invariably the same, and Rauschenberg can't conceal his lethargy. Here he isn't an artist so much as an alarmingly proficient factory. The only time one sees a flash of life is in the *Glut* series from the 1980s, assemblages made from gas station signs and automobile parts. They barely function as art, but there is a sense that Rauschenberg briefly rekindled some sense of purpose. This series was, however, short-lived. We are left, then, with the mementos of an artist bored by his own good fortune.

Robert Rauschenberg: A Retrospective betrays a lightweight artist in heavyweight drag, but don't underestimate the nature or depth of his influence. When Hickey goes on to posit Rauschenberg as the locus from which the art of our time radiates and coalesces, he's right, if not for the reasons he thinks. It is no coincidence that Jake and Dinos Chapman, the cutting-edge flavor of the month, are having their American debut concurrent with the Rauschenberg hoopla. Rauschenberg may, for all I know, disdain the Chapman brothers' unctuous perversities, but scatological horror shows are not that far removed from painting on one's bed. Rauschenberg and his progeny haven't filled the gap between art and life; they've obliterated it. "A pair of socks is no less suitable to make a painting with than wood, nails, turpentine, oil and fabric" is a Rauschenberg quote from the 1960s and the rallying cry of a generation—or two. The notion that anything can be art may once have been the cynical joke of an avant-gardist crank. It is now, however, the reigning orthodoxy. Once everything is art then nothing is art, and we are left in a world without distinctions. This is the world Robert Rauschenberg has disastrously ushered in.

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Music

At City Opera: a warhorse & a dark horse

by Alexander Coleman

The status of City Opera as New York's "second" opera company does not necessarily imply that the "first" opera house, the Metropolitan, is performing impeccably, or indeed is giving the most responsible account of the full operatic repertory, from baroque to contemporary. The Met, like Homer, can and does nod.

The opening weeks of the fall season of eight productions at the "new" New York City Opera represent the first productions presented under the leadership of general and artistic director Paul Kellogg, appointed in January 1996 to succeed the late Christopher Keene. Mr. Kellogg was the founder and nurturer of the Glimmerglass Opera in Cooperstown, New York, since 1979, a unique experimental summer opera festival that has featured both new and traditional works. One naturally hopes that Mr. Kellogg's arrival will bring new life to an opera company that, since its founding in the mid 1940s, has become an organic part of New York cultural life. Among other things, City Opera has come to be a useful counterpoise to its gargantuan neighbor at Lincoln Center. Following the past innovations of Julius Rudel, Beverly Sills, Christopher Keene, and now Mr. Kellogg, the company projects a fall and spring schedule of freshened oldies and new and revived works—operas of Tan Dun and Tobias Picker along with a resuscitation of Britten's *Paul Bunyan*, libretto by W. H. Auden, an early fruit of Britten and Auden's dalliance in the early Forties with life in the United States.

Going back a few years, one remembers that this company, in spite of whatever the vicissitudes it has suffered over the past decades, has functioned as a critical goad and contrast to the Met, performing Berg's *Wozzeck* in 1959 and pioneering fluent performances of the operas of Handel and Monteverdi, which were not often performed across the plaza. City Opera has encouraged contemporary American works (such as the now temporarily postponed *Esther* of Hugo Weisgall) and, in general, has been more daring even in the presentation of warhorses from the repertory. Two of their recent productions immediately come to mind—the extraordinary *Die Soldaten* of Bernd Alois Zimmermann (Fall 1991) and the more recent *Mathis der Maler* of Paul Hindemith (Fall 1995). The latter production (a performance splendidly conducted by Robert Duerr, replacing the ailing Christopher Keene) did dramatize, however, certain limitations in past productions by the company. Having seen prior stagings of *Mathis der Maler* in Boston and Vienna, under the respective musical direction of Sarah Caldwell and Karl Böhm, this reviewer can attest that the New York production was by far the most impressive musical realization of the work. The deficiencies were visual. One would hardly have been able to glean, except for the presence of the inevitable easel, that Mat-

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thias Grünewald was, with his *Isenheim Altarpiece* of 1515, a visionary painter of phantasmagoria equal to those of his near-contemporary Hieronymus Bosch. To this end, Ms. Caldwell had spread magnified patches of the most lurid parts of the triptych, projecting them onto scrims all over the otherwise rudimentary Boston staging; the effect was unsettling. The singers seemed haunted by the constant presence of Grünewald's art. Almost in spite of itself, Hindemith's heavy-handed allegory about the conflicts between politics and art came alive. In the New York City Opera production, it wasn't really a question of lack of financial resources, but an evident lack of imagination, something that Sarah Caldwell possessed in her heyday and which, some early notices have suggested, Mr. Kellogg is displaying these days.

For a start, it might be instructive to see how this company is performing two classic works from the repertory: Mozart's *Magic Flute* and a work still on the fringe of acceptance, Verdi's *Macbeth*. In the excellent English translation of Andrew Porter, City Opera's *Magic Flute* (in and out of production since its premiere a decade ago) was sung by a cast quite different from that of opening night earlier in September—a good test of vocal depth for any company. In general, the opera came across winningly and with proper brio under the baton of Derrick Inouye. The success of this production is all the more impressive given the wild tonal mixtures inherent in this "simple" but intractable opera, ranging from the proto-vaudeville comic jesting of the bumpkin Papageno, on to the stern and earnest Tamino and Pamina, then the "secular awe, without churchliness" (the words of musicologist Alfred Einstein) emanating from Sarastro's sublime arias.

Futile as it is to complain about the acoustics and the space at the New York State Theater, it may still be the case that this opera ideally prospers only in more limited theatrical venues, such as the eighteenth-century Swedish house used by Ingmar Bergman in his film of the opera, or indeed—even more minimally—as enchantingly projected by the Salzburger Marionette Theater. Nonetheless, Thierry Bosquet's sets and costumes, imposing in the temple scenes and appropriately bosky for Papageno, Tamino, and Pamina, exude the fairy-tale atmosphere so essential to draw an audience—and New Yorkers above all—into the particular world of *The Magic Flute*. The acting and the voice-production of Richard Clement as Tamino and Amy Burton as Pamina were engaging and fresh, and one can have only good things to say about the bumptious characterization of Papageno by Stephen Powell and the especially nasty and unctuous Monostatos of Jonathan Green. If the roles of the Queen of the Night and Sarastro—one in the musical stratosphere, the other descending to Plutonian depths—were not realized with absolute ease, the attainment of the near-impossible has to be more than sufficient for the purposes at hand. The dancing animals, tamed and subdued by Tamino's calming flute, were charmingly choreographed by Jessica Redel. The only disappointment was the plastic and highly unthreatening dragon attacking Tamino at the beginning of the opera—more writhing and snarling are in order. The three ladies, vigorous singers that they are, had their long forks at the ready, but stayed at such a distance from the thing that it seemed to expire on its own.

Verdi's *Macbeth* is not exactly a staple of any opera company in the way that the composer's *Otello* and *Falstaff* most certainly are. This relatively early work, which the Verdi critic Julian Budden ranked "with *Nabucco*, *Ernani*, and *Luisa Miller* as one of the four undisputed repertory pieces of the pre-*Rigoletto* period," was first performed in Florence in 1847 and in a revised version for Paris in 1865. The opera received an inordinate amount of affection from Verdi himself, who continued to be irritated and baffled by the fact that it was never popular even among Verdians. As Michael Feingold suggested in his program notes, "Giuseppe Verdi never knew what any English or

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American actor of the mid-nineteenth century—or our own time, for that matter—could have told him: Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is a play with a curse on it." Verdi's version was not premiered in New York for ninety-two years after the Paris performances. It was the New York City Opera which gave *Macbeth* its first hearing, in 1957. The following year, the Metropolitan Opera took it up as a vehicle for the stellar baritone Leonard Warren, and it was this version that was recorded for RCA Victor under the baton of Erich Leinsdorf.

Leaving aside the generalized hex surrounding anything to do with the Scottish Play, there are fairly cogent reasons for the lack of enthusiasm for the opera over the years. It is, as the Italian critics would have it, the "opera senza amore," a work without a compelling love interest since, differing from the Shakespearean original, Verdi's librettist has turned Lady Macbeth into an all-consuming, driving harridan who is at the source of all Macbeth's actions, while in the original play the murder of Banquo is "something that Macbeth deliberately keeps from his wife," as Budden has noted. In short, there is little passion in the opera, and this is further complicated by the fact that there is a glaring absence of a star role for a romantic tenor. Macduff's aria in the last act, impressive as it is in the lament for his massacred children, comes way too late for the expectations of most opera lovers, desirous as they are of a ringing set of tenor arias scattered throughout. Some of the martial music is pedestrian, to say the least. On the other hand, a compelling sleepwalker's scene by "the Lady" (as Verdi referred to her), the apparition scenes, and the general mischief as predicted by the witches all make for a well-crafted operatic melodrama, despite one sniping critic's appraisal of the weird sisters: "Verdi's witches, like Shakespeare's, are out of St. Trinian's." Question: how did the cartoons of Ronald Searle get into the making of *Macbeth*? Oh, well; as T. S. Eliot said, the new always creates its own precursors.

For this production, the only entirely new effort this fall, John Conklin has devised an appropriately grim Erector set of girders, a crane, and industrial stairwells, with costumes drab enough for Scotland, its soldiers and exiles. Leon Major, the director, has made the best use possible of the space designed originally, let us not forget, for Balanchine and the New York City Ballet. Verdi, in a letter to an impresario about a future production of the opera, insisted that "you will see that I need an excellent chorus: especially the female chorus must be good because there will be two witch choruses of the greatest importance. Pay attention also to the stage-machinery. In short, the things that require the greatest care in this opera are: *Chorus and Machinter*." Under the music direction of George Monahan, the orchestra and chorus were in lusty and supple coordination with each other, in spite of the varied distances between the pit, principals, and chorus. Apparitions and ghosts were well done.

It is true that there were a few torpid moments in the direction of stage business. In the culminating assassination of Banquo in Act Two, for example, Macbeth's henchmen are ordered to do away with Fleance at the same time they finish off his father, Banquo. However, in this production, as the daggers are plunged into Banquo, the murderers practically do curtsies for Fleance and make way for the child's escape; he saunters off into the wings instead of his being the object of a hot pursuit across the stage as Verdi wanted. On the other hand, the slow-motion battle between Birnam Wood and Dunsinane during the orchestral fugue in the last act is splendidly staged. Mark Delavan's portraiture of Macbeth could use a good dose of malevolent *terribilità*, so laid-back and round-toned is he, while "the Lady," as sung hell-for-leather by Lauren Flanigan, was balefully just right.

Dvořák in Stuyvesant Park

Stuyvesant Park, located just above Fourteenth Street at Second Avenue, must be one of the most ignored of pleasant places

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in downtown New York City. On December 13, 1941, Mayor LaGuardia, accompanied by various eminences, including Jan Masaryk, Bruno Walter, and Fritz Kreisler, dedicated a plaque affixed to the brownstone at 327 East Seventeenth Street, facing the park, where the Czech composer Antonín Dvořák had lived for nearly three years as director of the National Conservatory of Music of America, the only school of the arts ever blessed with a congressional charter from both House and Senate. Mayor LaGuardia declared Dvořák's home a "landmark," and there was talk of a museum. Some fifty years later, in August 1991, the building was demolished to make way for an AIDS treatment center.

Another ignominy had preceded the event of August 1991. A fine bronze statue of Dvořák a bit more than life-size, the last work of the Croatian-American sculptor Ivan Meštrović (1883–1962), had been donated in 1963 to the New York Philharmonic by the Czechoslovak National Council of America. The management of the orchestra responded to this largesse by relegating the work to the roof of Avery Fisher Hall, invisible to the public, where over the years it suffered severe pitting and general deterioration.

Thanks to the efforts of Mr. Steven Richman, music director and conductor of the Harmonie Ensemble/New York and founding member of the Dvořák American Heritage Association, the statue has been rescued from the roof of the concert hall, newly conserved and refinished, mounted on a splendid green granite pedestal, and placed in front of what was Dvořák's home, just at the northeast corner of Stuyvesant Park. This brings us to "Dvořák's Day," September 13, 1997, the unveiling of the restored statue.

In a ceremony presided over by Henry J. Stern, commissioner of parks and recreation, a full complement of speakers attested to the significance of the event. Indeed, Mr. Jack Taylor, head of the Stuyvesant Park Neighborhood Association, spoke in bitterly exorbitant terms of the lost fight for the preservation of the home in the years prior to 1991, while more celebratory comments were given by the Czech-born film director Milos Forman; the Czech ambassador to the United States, Alexandr Vondra; the mayor of Prague, Jan Koukal; and the first lady of the City of New York, Donna Hanover.

Mr. Richman must have been aware that the music was the thing—the music written by Dvořák both in New York City and in Spillville, Iowa, where he spent an intervening summer in a Czech émigré farmer community. Following the dedication of the statue, a concert of Dvořák's music was given at St. George's Church at the western edge of Stuyvesant Square, where up to the time of Dvořák's attendance the most famous parishioner had been J. P. Morgan. Greetings were read by Vaclav Havel and by Antonín Dvořák III, a bald and portly gentleman who had the air of good cheer that Dvořák's music always seems to exude. The concert began with the participation of the Czech violinist Josef Suk, another great-grandson of Dvořák, playing the Sonatina for Violin and Piano along with the Humoresque in G-flat major, done briskly and forthrightly, without a touch of sentimentality. Mr. Suk, then joined by two members of the Guarnieri Quartet, Michael Tree and Arnold Steinhardt, played the attractive *Terzetto* for String Trio. After the intermission, Mr. Richman, with a full orchestra composed of instrumentalists drawn from every major orchestra in the city, directed a rousing performance of the symphony *From the New World*, with the English horn solo in the Largo played exquisitely by Iveta Bachmannová of the Prague Symphony Orchestra.

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The media

Promises, promises

by James Bowman

"It weirds me out." As a grammatical "purist" (so pure that I even put "purist" in quotation marks), I of course deplore this verb "to weird [s.o.] out" and the slacker impersonal construction meaning, approximately, "I feel icky." Yet somehow the words seemed appropriate to describe my reaction to the sight of some half a million men gathered on the national Mall in Washington on October 4 to hug and cry and hold hands. The deplorable *fin de siècle* spectacle elicits an equally deplorable *fin de siècle* locution. Which is only to say that I am not an apologist for the Promise Keepers, nor for religious enthusiasts in general, nor for those who play the late twentieth-century game of displaying emotion in public in order to establish their political bona fides in the eyes of some cretin of a TV reporter. But what a splendid illustration the Promise Keepers rally provided of the way in which the media work in concert to shape a story to fit with their own political consensus and their mythopoeic assumptions.

In this case, it was *The Washington Post* which took the lead in setting up the frame of reference in which the story would almost invariably appear in the rest of the media. As early as August, the *Post* was reporting prominently not on the PK themselves but on the "campaign" by the National Organization for Women "to take the mask off" these men and reveal them as, in reality, enslavers of women. Now, if you do not understand the ludicrousness of this charge, you had better stop reading now (and then check yourself into the nearest mental hospital). It will be assumed in what follows. Yet not so much as a hint of this ludicrousness was ever allowed to appear in *The Washington Post*'s extensive coverage of what it invariably referred to as the "controversy" over the Promise Keepers, or in any of the other media accounts which followed the *Post*'s lead.

True, a case can be made for the proposition that marriage itself is objectively an enslavement of women. Reasonable people have argued so. Reasonable people could also argue that NOW is or ought to be opposed to the Promise Keepers in the same way that classic Marxists are opposed to the welfare state, since anything which mitigates the evils of the status quo makes it more difficult for the status quo to be overthrown. But neither of these reasonable arguments were made in any of the press accounts I read or watched. Instead, what no reasonable and hardly any sane person could contend, namely that these huggers and weepers intended to chain their women to the stove, was endlessly repeated in the news as the view of "some" or even of "many" women.

NOW's propaganda line (seconded by various other left-wing organizations through their "spokesmen") was taken at its face value and in defiance of its absurdity by what is laughably called "objective" jour-

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nalism. Indeed, it is that very pose of objectivity which allowed it to happen. For the average editor's view of objectivity has nothing to do with a disinterested attempt to look into the truth, or a reasonable and fair person's sorting and evaluating of evidence. It is simply that, if a socially approved interest group (and NOW, unlike—say—the Ku Klux Klan, is an approved group) has a statement to make on a subject of public interest, it must be run without editorial comment. Furthermore, if that statement, however artificially, may be deemed to generate "controversy" you run with the controversy.

That, at any rate, is what *The Washington Post* did. Nearly a month before the rally but after Ms. Ireland had fired the first shots, the Sunday "Outlook" section ran a long piece on the Promise Keepers by Stephanie Coontz, author of *The Way We Never Were* and a woman who is making a career out of an attempt to debunk traditionalist social attitudes as merely nostalgic and without foundation, even in the past. She brought the same patronizing attitude to her account of the Promise Keepers, writing that "however disturbing the ideology of the leaders, the motivations that bring thousands of men together for these events are not fascist, or even explicitly right wing." One can but hope that those so cleared of the charge of fascism and right wingery are properly grateful!

"Critics of the Promise Keepers," she went on, "should not fall into the trap of demonizing the men to whom these rallies appeal," since the movement was to her "a response to the failure of patriarchy. It reflects a recognition that the flip side of male domination within families is male desertion of families. While Promise Keepers does not support male-female equality, neither does it call for a revival of the kind of patriarchy that right up to the 1950s . . ." and so on. Well, that's a relief! Yet so sure is she that her audience will recognize (and deplore) that "kind of patriarchy" that her only example of the vicious practices of the 1950s is that of having "two budgets in many families—one for the wife and children, and a second, with more recreational income, for the husband." Needless to add, I guess, is the assumption that there's nothing as horrible as *that* going on in the enlightened 1990s.

"For many women," says Ms. Coontz, "benevolent paternalism may well be the highest quality of life they can aspire to in today's winner-take-all, dependents-be-damned economy and culture." Today's? Would that be as opposed to *yesterday's* economy and culture—back in those bad old 1950s that we are forbidden to be nostalgic about?

> Somehow, those of us with a different vision of how to support families and improve relations between men and women must find ways of responding to the legitimate concerns and decent impulses of those who correctly see a crisis of obligation and commitment in modern America. The question is how to do this without giving an inch to the reactionary political agenda of the core leadership of the Promise Keepers.

Her piece was then followed by an even more shrill and stupid screed from Patricia Ireland. This was *The Washington Post*'s idea of balance.

Then, two and a half weeks later, the *Post* ran a piece by Marcia Slacum Greene and Hamil R. Harris chronicling at mind-numbing length the efforts by the Promise Keepers organization to make itself more "diverse." This, true, would ordinarily be the most important thing about it from the *Post*'s point of view. But Ms. Slacum Greene had another go two days later, professing to find widespread divisions among women who are "staunch supporters" on the one hand and "outspoken opponents" on the other, between "those who say it has helped their families and"—. And what? And those who say it has hurt their families? No. Those appear to be a bit thin on the ground. Instead, she can only find the "out-

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spoken opponents" among "those who contend the groups' biblical interpretations work against women's rights."

In other words, to Ms. Slacum Greene, the opinions of those who actually know what they are talking about are no more "privileged" than those whose job it is to jerk their feminist knees in public. That's the *Post* for you, too. After quoting a number of ordinary wives who found their husbands transformed for the better as a result of going to a PK rally, she lines up on the other side (who but?) Patricia Ireland (I wonder what she thinks?); Alfred Ross, "a lawyer with the New York-based Center for Democracy Studies" (who "warned that Promise Keepers' views of women's roles ultimately will help destroy families"); and Rev. Donna F. G. Hailson of the board of directors of "American Baptist Evangelicals" who, professing to "believe in a mutual submission," said that she "could make an equally good argument based on Scripture for an egalitarian position." The argument itself was doubtless cut for lack of space.

The incredible unbalance, in any meaningful sense, of such a report never occurs to Ms. Slacum Greene. In *The Washington Post*, actual experience is of no more value than political ideology, at least if it is a leftist ideology. The week before the rally, the *Post* ran two big features on the PK's leader, Coach Bill McCartney ("He's the Coach for the Faithful—Or the Far Right?" by Gabriel Escobar) and on the Promise Keepers' finances ("Promise Keepers' Success Also Measured in Dollars" by Saundra Torry), which were, if you understand the language of the media Left, decidedly alarmist in tone.

Escobar quoted James Ryle, pastor of the Vineyard church in Boulder, Colorado, whom he described as McCartney's "Spiritual mentor and close friend," as saying that the coach prays constantly: "He has a saying. Prayer builds intimacy: for whom you pray, with whom you pray and to whom you pray.'"

> That simple philosophy will be applied on the grandest scale yet during six hours on the Mall. Bringing intimacy to praying multitudes has been tested at regional rallies held in stadiums since 1991, mass spectacles that ignited believers even as they chilled others who wonder what promises these men will end up keeping.

And who were these chilly "others"? We got a hint further down in the piece:

> To people in Boulder who felt the impact of his religious zeal, and to a small group of observers who focus on how he and the Promise Keepers fit into the religious right, McCartney represents more than a magnetic, repentant sinner. They view his rise as part of a successful effort by the extreme religious right to amass followers without revealing an agenda, and instead, to depict the movement as a wholesome effort to make men behave and atone.
>
> "McCartney and his Penis Keepers" is how part of the Boulder community irreverently dismisses him. . . .

You read on and you find that "part of the Boulder community" means one Regina Cowles, sometime president of the Colorado chapter of NOW, and the proprietor of the local abortion mill, a Mr. Warren Hern. Mr. Hern is the author of an "authoritative" text on late-term abortion and, equally authoritatively, dismissed the PK (Stephanie Coontz to the contrary notwithstanding) as "a fascist movement." McCartney, similarly, is "an absolutely primitive man who wants political power . . . an incredibly ignorant man and a very bigoted man. He's poison."

By such means did Escobar, in keeping with what appears to be *The Washington Post*'s official policy, attempt to create the illusion that a handful of lunatic harridans, who presumably find the idea of men's keeping either promises or penises personally offensive, and the odd abortionist are an adequate social, moral, or intellectual counterweight (for the sake of "balance") to the mass movement he is reporting on. He went on to report that McCartney was once associated with an organization called

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"Word of God" which—there are dark hints—behaved suspiciously like a cult. Ms. Torry the next day added her brand to the fire by figuring up the organization's assets as best she could and finding them large enough to compel the conclusion that it was "as much about big business as about religion."

Escobar was at it again in the Metro Section of October 3, trying his best to find something sinister in the next day's rally. He quoted the Senate chaplain, Lloyd John Ogilvie, as saying that "every effort is being made to keep the meeting nonpolitical and focused on God and the need for His blessing on our nation." Then Escobar went on to note:

> The reason for the caution, although not uttered aloud yesterday, can be found on the not widely circulated list of speakers for the rally. Among the 44 people who are scheduled to address the gathering of evangelical Christian men are several controversial figures, little-known religious leaders who have established their own churches and who in the past have staked out extreme positions on such sensitive topics as race and women's rights.

As an example of an "extreme position" on race, he quoted one of the speakers at the rally, the Rev. Joseph Garlington, a black preacher from Pittsburgh, as having told a white audience: "You don't have to keep saying you're sorry." An "extreme position" on women's rights was that of the Rev. Tony Evans of Oak Cliff Bible Fellowship in Dallas, who once said: "I'm not suggesting that you ask for your role back. I'm urging you to take it back." Moreover, there was a hint of the charge of extremism in a quotation from one of the rally's organizers who mentioned that the women involved in the rally were having "great shopping sprees." Naturally, this "seemed to bolster one stereotype of women."

Escobar noted that "the controversy"—and on his showing, is there anything in the world up to and including brushing one's teeth and eating one's dinner which would not be matter for "controversy"?—"over Promise Keepers does not appear to be resonating with many of those planning to attend." What a laugh! In other words, despite his own best efforts to make them think that there are angry masses of counter-demonstrators against the "patriarchy" they represent, these people are not taking him seriously. Even funnier was the fact that he turned out to be wrong. At least, judging by the content of most of the speeches I heard at the rally, I began to think that the organizers had been spooked. There was actually very little said about the roles of men and women in the home, and certainly no hint of women's being asked to assume a subordinate one.

Instead, like nearly every other mass demonstration on the Mall, its object by the end of the day appeared to be to use happy talk about race not so much to hide its real objectives as to establish its title to have any public objectives at all. So many speeches were about racial reconciliation that they had to be there for the sake of defusing controversy. It worked, too. No less a liberal bigfoot than E. J. Dionne of *The Washington Post* clucked approvingly that the Promise Keepers, for all their faults, deserved "a good word" for the fact that, unlike Louis Farrakhan's Million Man March ("to which it bears some similarities"), they have "engaged in an aggressive campaign of racial healing." So, although they are presumably little better than Neanderthals insofar as they "embrace an assertively right-wing, anti-feminist message," they should feel full of pride that "in declaring racism a sin, Promise Keepers are doing the Lord's work."

One could not but be struck, however, on this day of penitence, by the relative absence of any mention of anything widely regarded as a sin before about 1954. What has long been taken for granted in the media culture (where there are no sins save racism, sexism, and homophobia), has now apparently become the doctrine of evangelical Christians.

Not that, beneath the uncontroversial

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race talk, there were not some real objectives which remained largely unstated—unless you count the fact that under the big marquees where they were selling box lunches for seven dollars, the women wore yellow tags inscribed simply: "Food." But the feminist protest and the prominence it was given in the media accomplished at least three important objectives for the small but influential community of progressive thinkers. First, this huge gathering of macho sportsmen was cowed into keeping quiet about the more traditionalist aspects of their program (as if that will do them any good!). Second, their sticking to emotional public penitence could be seen as buying into the feminists' own idea of politicizing private and domestic life. Third, they managed to make themselves and their sex look so ridiculous in the process.

We should not underestimate the significance of the fact that this big rally of "Penis Keepers" and apologists for the patriarchy turned into a cry-fest, yet another redundant example of social Oprahfication—or that, where it was not *The Washington Post*'s "controversy" (prominently reported on the television news, especially NBC's and CNN's), it was the crying and hugging that made the news. That's where it was covered as news at all. *Time* and the *Los Angeles Times* didn't even mention it. Even most feminists recognize that women are better at hugging and men are better at killing people and blowing things up. But now the manly, football-loving men of the Promise Keepers want to hug, too! They sang "Onward, Christian Soldiers" and some sported T-shirts proclaiming that they were, in fact, members of "God's Army." But, if so, it was the oddest army that ever marched, for there was never any hint throughout the long afternoon of who this army's enemy might be.

For the "danger" of the Promise Keepers is exactly the opposite of what the feminists suppose it to be. Now that those fighters whose powers of aggression and dominance vis-à-vis the rest of the world have made their daughters the richest and most powerful women in human history have now decided to become huggers, it is as good as an advertisement that this is a country which will no longer fight for its survival. Therefore, it cannot survive long, for all its clean and "smart" weapons designed to keep the messiness of combat a long, long way away. Bill McCartney says, "You look at the nations before us that have been judged. . . . They have deteriorated just like we have." Sades of the poor old Roman Empire once again flit before our mind's eye. But there was not much evidence, at this media-savvy rally, that much can be done by the Promise Keepers about the judgment from above—from the Gods of the Copybook Headings if not from the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—that awaits these United States. Perhaps a few of these men's sons will still be alive to enjoy a certain grim satisfaction at the sight of the NOW leadership being led off into slavery by whatever band of splendid barbarians it is that finally puts an end to the American Empire.

Editor's note: We wish to call attention to the recent publication of *At the Corner of the Eye*, by Patricia Hooper (Michigan State University Press, $13.95 paper), a portion of which first appeared in *The New Criterion*.

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Verse chronicle

Betrayals of the tongue

by William Logan

Geoffrey Hill's handsome and brutish new poems are fragments of his old covenant with language: in *Canaan* the rough verse measures a private poetry in public themes.[1] The lowlands of Canaan were promised the Israelites before their forty-year diet of manna (how dreadful the stuff must have tasted), the land of redemption Moses could gesture toward but never reach. Redemption is not the subject of Hill's poetry so much as its sin (his difficulty is his greatest conceit): he is one of the last poets to believe language is the proper site of faith, that nothing except language will redeem the betrayals of the tongue.

> Aspiring Grantham
> rises above itself.
> Tall churches wade the fen
> on their stilts of glass.
>
> Crowned Ely stands beset
> by winds of straw-burning,
> by the crouched run of flame.
> Cambridge lies dark, and dead
>
> predestined Elstow
> where Bunyan struck his fear—
> flint creed, tinder of wrath—
> to flagrant mercies.

This bleak vision is called "Dark-Land," and few readers would know the term from *Pilgrim's Progress* ("I am of Dark-land," said Valiant-for-Truth) if Hill hadn't thoughtfully (and perversely) used it elsewhere as an epigraph. The thicket of required facts only begins in Grantham being the birthplace of Margaret Thatcher (daughter of a shopkeeper and so rising above her station) as well as site of one of the finest English medieval churches; Ely, in the middle of East Anglian fens (itself an island—eel island—before the fens were drained), the last place of resistance to the Norman conquest, is dominated by its Gothic cathedral; Elstow was Bunyan's birthplace. Through such concealed facts the poem's drive toward order accumulates; from the darkness of the present, they recall the revivals and religious awakenings of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The modern landscape is scoured and beleaguered, old religion wiped clean for "national heritage," striving mercantile towns more honored than ancient sites of worship. If a preacher like Bunyan strikes a spark in the surrounding night, the mercies are apt to be flagrant; but Hill has been a poet for whom a dark pun is a source of light.

The unlikely juxtaposition of terms in "Mysticism and Democracy" argues (as did the scholar Rufus Jones in a book of that title) that the modern democratic instinct developed in those religious revivals (self-governing churches becoming a microcosm of populist democracy), that democracy was

1 *Canaan*, by Geoffrey Hill; Houghton Mifflin, 76 pages, $22.

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a belief mystical in character. *Canaan* is a series of braided sequences on the body politic, the lines sometimes fragmentary, the sequences divided against themselves: the scattered parts of "To the High Court of Parliament," "Mysticism and Democracy," "Dark-Land," and "Parentalia" are the limbs of Osiris, and the faith (and finicky trust) of readers must restore them to a living whole.

Hill honors those martyred for politics: "De Jure Belli ac Pacis" (the title of Grotius's famous tract, which formed the basis of international law) is dedicated to one of the conspirators in the July plot against Hitler.

> The people moves as one spirit unfettered
> claim our assessors of stone.
> When the nations
> fall dispossessed such conjurings possess them,
> elaborate barren fountains, projected
> aqueducts
> where water is no longer found.
> Where would one find Grotius for that matter,
> the secular justice clamant among psalms,
> huge-fisted visionary Comenius . . . ?
> Could none predict these haughty
> degradations
> as now your high-strung
> martyred resistance serves
> to consecrate the liberties of Maastricht?

Though the Maastricht treaty, setting terms for European union, is the proper end of the last war, "liberties" is cruelly ambiguous. The merging of Europe is also a loss of identity; and if the resistance of von Haeften and others was "high-strung," they were themselves "high-strung" by piano wire at their executions. Hill finds his faith deep in the phrase, in those assessors of stone that might be gravestone or monument.

I have lingered over the snarled possibility of such lines because Hill's poetry withholds its meanings out of charity, out of respect, as if only the student of the word deserved revelation of the Word. In our lethal time, poetry is the liturgy of a dead language, and Hill's invocation of religious revivals past calls for the resurrection of a tongue now divided by its tongues, even as politicians make louder and lying obeisance to the past (the Bible has become a real-estate map). The damned ambitions of such language have fatal grandeur, most evident in Hill's portrait of the forsaken beauty of English landscape, where rain

> streams on half-visible clatter of the wind
> lapsing and rising,
> that clouds the pond's green mistletoe of
> spawn,
> seeps among nettlebeds and rust-brown sorrel,
> perpetual ivy burrowed by weak light,
> makes carved shapes crumble. . . .

Some of these poems were published prematurely in *New & Collected Poems* (1992), and the cunning revisions and additions have sharpened their discontents (a reader may amuse himself at thought of this poet, who so hates to revise in public, revising in public). At times the broken phrasings sink into the fens—Hill is too eager a Valiant-for-Truth, too self-pleased a prophet without honor (as if the difficulty of his poetry were a vengeance on his slack-jawed readers). This is a cost some readers will bear for the barbed wire of such elegies and addresses; such cautious, cautionary verse tangled in Bible and classic; the compact religious ghosts of his first book of short poems for almost two decades.

Rich, quarrelsome (meaning forever contending with meaning), laden with its own soiled pleasures, Hill's poetry is the major achievement of late twentieth-century verse. If it is also at times indrawn, obdurate past reason, sneering at "vacancy's rabble," a public poetry without a public, that is a judgment on our time (Hill is so high minded, you wish once in a while he'd succumb to low temptations). His sedimentary skills have troubled English poetry for almost half a century, and *Canaan* is one of the few serious books we will have to mark the millennium.

The Errancy is Jorie Graham's weakest and most dispiriting book, the tics and fussiness

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of her recent style become nothing more than style (many poets praise Graham for her ambition, but ambition is not a classy word for achievement), as if she had forgotten that rendering so minutely her hither-dither, helter-skelter thinking had a point: to call into question the way a poem fixes perception.[2]

> And the frontier where the notes pulse,
> fringe, then fray
> the very same stillness we place our outlines
> in, the very same one we have to breathe,
> and flare our tiny nets of words
> into (who's there?)(what do you hear?)(what
> hear?)(still
> there?)—the very same—we listen in there—
> the zero glistens—the comma holds—
> flames behind where the siren goes off,
> where someone is killed but only *by accident* so
> you are free to cross the street now—
> I watch the lovers a long time—
> they kiss as if trying to massacre
> difference. . . .

Errancy is the state of error, though it looks like a temp agency for clumsy typists. Here the buttonholing parentheses, the hacked-off line breaks, the italics and breathless dashes all contribute to a taxonomy of emphasis far beyond the requirements (it's just a humdrum day in a city plaza). Half the poems end with a dash, an ellipsis, a question, or nothing at all; some have passages where every line is a new stanza. Her armory of rhetorical and typographical effect also includes the lacuna (her most devious device, for a word that refuses to be called forth), rhetorical questions, little oh's of exclamation, and the long dramatic space ("And then no sound").

Punctuation is frustrating and limiting for a poet who wants to take poems beyond the pieties of the past, but Graham's devices (often just a housebroken version of avant-garde writing) are reminiscent, not of e e cummings, whose effects were jokey and painterly, but of the forgotten José Garcia Villa, who wrote countless poems where every word was separated by a comma (as well as a poem consisting of nothing but commas). Graham's major theme is the immanence of the ordinary, but does the ordinary require quite such devout effusion, such faked urgency? She's newly taken with guardian angels—there's a party downstairs, and upstairs an angel is arranging things:

> the honeycombing
> thoughts are felt to *dialogue,* a form of self-
> congratulation, no?, or is it suffering? I'm
> a bit
> dizzy up here rearranging things,
> they will come up here soon, and need
> a setting for their fears,
> and loves, an architecture for their
> evolutionary
> morphic needs. . . .

To *dialogue*? Their *morphic needs*? Suddenly you're watching a version of *It's a Wonderful Life* where Clarence has become a follower of Derrida. Too often Graham's wild means conceal all-too-sentimental ends.

Graham has been one of the most rashly daring contemporary poets (she's the Evel Knievel of odd stunts), but as the praise has gotten louder the poetry has gotten worse. The new poems often begin in trivial domestic experience (being stuck in traffic, say), but soon they're spiraling off into tedious immensities and vacancies, the empty-headed philosophizing that disfigured the verse of James Dickey and Robert Penn Warren. Even by her own standards, the writing is sometimes dreadful: "wielding utter particularity in this pregnant bagfulness," "crustaceous mylar day must nibble at, gum at," "the dogs of perspective gather round me." She seems unable to resist any opportunity for goggle-eyed pretension or gasps of wonder ("Clasp me, trellis of glancings,/ delicatest machine—/ body of the absconding *god*"). Such quotes don't begin to suggest the page-by-page exhaustion of impulse, the near incoherence that makes these poems a kind of mania, as if she were shouting them from street corners,

2 *The Errancy*, by Jorie Graham; Ecco, 112 pages, $22.

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lost in the frenzy and ecstasy of inner monologue.

And yet. And yet. The end of "Le Manteau de Pascal" is a fugue of unreal beauty:

> you do understand, don't you, by looking?
> a neck like a vase awaiting its cut flower,
> filled with the sensation of being suddenly
> completed,
> the moment the prize is lost, the erotic
> tingling,
> the wool-gabardine mix, its grammatical
> weave,
> —you do understand, don't you, by looking?—
> never never destined to lose its elasticity,
> it was this night I believe but possibly
> the next
> I saw clearly the impossibility of staying
> filled with the sensation of being suddenly
> completed,
> also of unknown origin, not shade-giving, not
> chronological
> since the normal growth of boughs is
> radiating. . . .

Earlier in the poem a passage from Hopkins's journals has the hard-edged observation, the sense of the spiritual within seeing, that Graham for all her mugging never approaches. A few of its phrases find their way here, in a moment where the means of her poem do not resist its ends.

Graham can still write lovely lines when she cares to ("when only a bit of wind/ litigated in the sycamores"—that series of stresses on the lilting short *i*), and two or three religious poems (particularly "In the Pasture" and "Easter Morning Aubade") almost recall the stringency and oddness of her best work (just as a prurient poem on rape recalls her worst). Such gestures are overwhelmed by the uninspired rambling, less and less anchored by subject, of this humorless book. The beauty of Whitman was his I—I—I, but the tragedy of Graham is her me—me—me—me.

J. V. Cunningham was a poet's poet, which means the appreciation of his peers partly explained the absence of his audience—a poet's poet is sometimes a classic waiting to happen (like Elizabeth Bishop), but often just a minority taste. *The Poems of J. V. Cunningham* is the definitive work of this minor poet, embalming him in a lengthy introduction and seventy pages of notes.[3]

Most of Cunningham's poems were epigrams, which seem a modest ambition now, when art is long and getting longer. A contemporary and sometime friend of Yvor Winters, during the Depression Cunningham was a student in classics at Stanford, eventually writing a doctoral dissertation on Shakespeare. He started as a poet of musty diction and metaphysical torpor: for every phrase like "The wasp in the darkened chamber," there are dozens of lines like "You are the problem I propose,/ My dear, the text my musings glose," or passages like

> More than the ash stays you from nothingness!
> Nor here nor there is a consuming pyre!
> Your essence is in infinite regress
> That burns with varying consistent fire,
> Mythical bird that bears in burying!

Cunningham manages to kill off any taste for metaphysical poetry by such archaizing (his early poems are like those Medieval Faires where people dress up as Vikings and throw axes, then go home and open a Budweiser)—the language had nothing to do with the life lived. It must have been a surprise to learn that Donne and Jonson were never coming back.

In the midst of these ingrown, bookish poems, drab as hotel wallpaper, full of barely recognized rage and sexual tension, "Meditation on Statistical Method" is like Archimedes' shout:

> Plato, despair!
> We prove by norms
> How numbers bear
> Empiric forms,

3 *The Poems of J. V. Cunningham*, edited and with an introduction and commentary by Timothy Steele; Swallow Press/Ohio University Press, 215 pages, $28.95; $16.95 (paper).

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How random wrong
Will average right
If time be long
And error slight;

But in our hearts
Hyperbole
Curves and departs
To infinity.

Error is boundless.
Nor hope nor doubt,
Though both be groundless,
Will average out.

Here the mordant despair finds its medium: the betrayal of grinding man-in-a-gray-flannel-suit culture is so savage, it's a shock to realize this was written during the war. The "Meditation" (almost irreligious in its approach to the ethical) has Empson's oddly intellective passion, his taste for science as ground for the metaphysical—but neither poet could force such tastes to yield much poetry.

This was Cunningham's anthology piece. By his early thirties the poems were over; the next forty years were given mostly to epigrams, when there was anything to give. Epigrams concentrate the mind, and a hangman's gloom hangs over Cunningham's—many are dingy and depressive as his poems (though as he aged the epigrams grew more fluent), but some have the nasty zing of a man with Larkin's misanthropy and considerable neuroses of his own.

Jove courted Danaë with golden love,
But you're not Danaë, and I'm not Jove.
***
God is love. Then by conversion
Love is God, and sex conversion.
***
Naked I came, naked I leave the scene,
And naked was my pastime in between.

The double entendre is an act properly metaphysical: it gives the physical its other name. Cunningham's epigrams are best when sexual; his anxieties serve his self-contempts, while giving them standing in wit. Otherwise this version of a poem from the *Palatine Anthology* would make self-loathing loathsome, instead of unsteadily comic:

And now you're ready who while she was
here
Hung like a flag in a calm. Friend, though
you stand
Erect and eager, in your eye a tear,
I will not pity you, or lend a hand.

Timothy Steele's strangely defensive introduction makes quite a sales pitch for the poet, and there's hardly a banality he avoids: "Cunningham is a moving writer," "he well communicates a vivid and respectful appreciation of the precariousness of life," "May living eyes find in this collection delight and profit." No copywriter could have done worse; most would have done better. Steele's notes show scholarly thoroughness and pedantic fussiness (he's the author of an interesting book on meter): though most readers under forty will want an introduction to Cunningham's work, Steele assumes they need a history of the epigram and a primer of English meter as well. The notes, occasionally quite helpful, tell us what "Tudor" means and who Freud was ("founded psychoanalysis"). Cunningham would have laughed dryly at what idiots his readers have become.

It's hard to know what mischievous god (Bacchus, perhaps) lured Ted Hughes into his *Tales from Ovid*.[4] In recent decades, the drive to write has found only mediocre expression in Hughes's poetry, though he is still a small industry of poem, criticism, and anthology. The poet laureate has not found much inspiration in being poet laureate, though that's hardly the fault of the Windsors, who require a satirist with the tragic taste of Swift.

Much of our literature's familiarity with classic myth descends through Ovid, and

4 *Tales from Ovid*, by Ted Hughes; Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 257 pages, $35.

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each generation remakes the myths in its image: these prosy, muscular improvisations attempt to turn Ovid into a version of Ted Hughes, a poet of *passion* ("Not just ordinary passion either, but human passion *in extremis*—passion where it combusts, or levitates, or mutates"). But Ovid was a witty *bon vivant*, pampered and feted when young, risqué enough to have his *Ars Amatoria* banned. His subject may have been the depravity and passion of gods, but he wrote for aesthetes—a lot of lark's tongues must have been devoured during readings of his poetry. We know little about how seriously the Romans took their gods, but the squalid fates of the *Metamorphoses* may have provoked as much laughter as tears—the metamorphoses are often all-too-appropriate punishments for hubris.

Hughes's versions of two dozen tales are in gruff free verse, the no-nonsense style in miner's boots. When he writes that Venus "swirled in the uplift of incense/ Like a great fish suddenly bulging/ Into a tide-freshened pool," or that Chaos was "A huge agglomeration of upset./ A bolus of everything—but/ As if aborted," you think, oh, wicked old Ted Hughes! Though he carts in new metaphors by the barrow load, though most of the tales are fairly close to the original, they lack the deceits and arch torsions of Ovid's verse. If you can't read Latin, the pleasures of that verse are usually absent—against Pope's and Chapman's Homer and Dryden's Virgil, in English poor Ovid has only Arthur Golding's overrated and nearly unreadable fourteeners. Hughes has made his Ovid mildly up to date, with mention of jujus, gangsters, straitjackets, photons, and spaghetti; but mostly the transformations sound strained and unlikely. Here is Pentheus on Tiresias:

> "Dreams," he explained,
> "Which this methane-mouth
> Tells us are the dark manifesto
> Of the corrector,
> In fact are corpse-lights, the ignes fatui,
> Miasma from the long-drop
> And fermenting pit
> Of what we don't want, don't need,
> And have dumped.
> They rise from the lower bowel. And lower."

Sometimes the metaphors just get in each other's way.

> You have become sots.
> You have dunked it all, like a doughnut,
> Into a mugful of junk music—
> Which is actually the belly-laugh
> Of this androgynous, half-titted witch.

Hughes can't ruin completely some of Ovid's *tours de force*—the terror as transformation overtakes Actaeon or the sisters of Phaëthon, the shame of the raped Callisto or Philomela. But his handling of minor details is often confused; and though in his introduction he makes no mention of practice or method, the tales seem less versions of Ovid than versions of versions of Ovid. English has startling translations by poets who couldn't read the originals (Pound's *Cathay*, some of Lowell's *Imitations,* Logue's uneven *Iliad*). The difficulty in working from another translation (Mary Innes's stilted Fifties prose may have been close at hand) is not imitation but the phrase-by-phrase aversion from someone else's words.

Ovid fawned over the Caesars (he too was a poet laureate of sorts), not that the fawning did him any more good than pandering to aesthetes with tales of dark love and deadly sex. Men find themselves superior to myth, until they suffer the fate of myth: Ovid died after nine years in exile, still seeking pardon of the emperor for an "indiscretion." To become something original, to be touched by a god—this must have been the sentimental wish of Ovid's audience. You need look no further than the fantasies of the emperors, their cults and faked apotheoses, to know the secret desires of the ruling class. They were so rich they longed to be poor, like Marie Antoinette, who longed to play milkmaid as long as she could return to playing Marie Antoinette again.

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Once or twice in this grim, lifeless book a passage suggests how delightful a Hughes his Ovid might have been.

> He brushed his hand over a clump of grass,
> The blades stayed bent—soft ribbons
> Of gold foil. A ripe ear of corn
> Was crisp and dry and light as he plucked it
> But a heavy slug of gold, intricately braided
> As he rolled it between his palms.
> It was then that a cold thought seemed
> to whisper.

The foreshadowing and the metaphors are pure Hughes—here Hughes is having fun, and you wish he were having fun more often. In *Tales from Ovid* his touch turns everything to lead.

Amy Clampitt died three years ago at seventy-three, barely a decade after publication of her first book. Her poems broke into print in mature form, like Athena from the head of Zeus, and many readers took her for a poet decades younger (for years she was sly about her birthdate). It isn't that poetry is a child's game (Chatterton dead at seventeen, Keats at twenty-five, Shelley at twenty-nine) or that many poets write their best work before they turn thirty. Aging poets often suffer arteriosclerosis as awards shower upon them, and even latecomers like Stevens or Frost, whose first books came at or after the cusp of forty, are not immune to an ague of spirit, becoming the great man before they are great men. Clampitt was a brazen innocent (has any poet starting later started better?), and the poetry never lost that sense of discovery in the landscape as well as the language.

The five books gathered in *The Collected Poems of Amy Clampitt* have been reprinted without editorial interference, a fond and rambling foreword by Mary Jo Salter catching much of Clampitt's wayward spirit—the gawky, birdlike presence; the high-pitched antic voice; the allergy to cars and planes and later even trains (the bus or ship was her preferred mode of travel, and she might have been happier in buggy or dog cart).[5] Her poems spilled down the page with cheerful abandon; and the early poems (in a way her most distinctive) were often single sentences, the syntax artfully deployed in a series of delays and distractions as the thought juddered this way and that. Her long sentences were sometimes a splendor of false climaxes.

> The poplars gray as a ghost by the creek,
> fiddlehead coils still in fuzz, the spruces
> tipped fingerling green, tamaracks gauzing
> the bog, the aspens translucent, a tremor
> lit from within—oh, and the air
>
> here, the sea air an easterly rinsing
> of appletrees so decrepit, so crabbed
> at the knuckle, it's a wonder they manage
> to keep it up, year after year, though
> the fragrance is ageless:
>
> carmine love-knots unclenching to a rose-
> pink pucker that whitens as it breaks open,
> admitting the offices of pollen-combing,
> nectar-
> siphoning bees: all these, at the beginning
> of June, one could count on. . . .

We are still half a dozen lines from the end—she was our Faulkner of gymnastic syntax. Repetition was a form of resistance, of hesitation alive in the form; though her lists often got the better of her, their delight was reminiscent of Auden in the pure fecundity of imagination.

> Inquire what consciousness is made of
> with Galen, with Leonardo, Leeuwenhoek
> or Dr. Tulp, and you find two hemispheres,
> a walnut in a bath of humors,
>
> a skullcapped wreath of arteries, a weft
> of fibrous thoroughfares along the walls
> of Plato's cave, the cave walls of Lascaux:
> those shambling herds, this hollow
>
> populous with fissures, declivities,

5 *The Collected Poems of Amy Clampitt*, with a foreword by Mary Jo Salter; Knopf, 459 pages, $30.

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arboreal thicketings, with pairings
and degrees, this fist-sized flutter,
mirror-lake of matter,

seat of dolor and jubilee, the law of Moses
and the giggling underneath the bedclothes,
of Bedlam and the Coronation Anthem—all
these shut up in a nutshell.

Thus, the brain. She could make something from nothing, even of the nothings something was not ("no loom, no spinneret, no forge, no factor,/ no process whatsoever, patent/ applied or not applied for"). Her poems sidled toward their point, the eye ever caught by some bright flash elsewhere; and sometimes there didn't seem to be much point beyond the piling up of phrases, the hectic disposition of fresh vocabulary, the sentences falling forward toward an ending cut short, like an amateur singer yanked offstage.

Some poems were too tenuously balanced on a single idea, overloaded with sequins of detail glinting with nothing but the desire to accumulate—Clampitt suffered the Midas touch, without always knowing what to touch. Then the seeing was no longer believing—the richness could become wreckage, the prodigality a selfishness (Clampitt hated to leave anything out, but if a poem includes everything it is just the world). Part of her charm was in the danger of being dazzled by local effects—the baroque vocabulary out of a shotgunned page of Roget's, the facts winkled from some encyclopedia: there's nothing like failure thinly skirted to increase the tension of pleasure. That desperate richness was practiced as if the phrase behind had only just thought of the phrase ahead. It seemed to surprise the author no less than the reader when a poem circled back to its beginning like a benzene ring.

But if Clampitt was content to write the same poems again and again (she was a catalogue of seed plants, a royal aviary), how different she made the best of them (the worst were a fabric so similar, poem to poem, a reader had to look at the title to recall if the subject was bird or breviary). Among her contemporaries she was closest to James Merrill—the flamboyant surfaces, the preposterously embroidered lexicon (the inheritance of Auden), the sinuous thought and conversational asides (not as witty, but not as frivolous, either). A longer view might mark a different angle of descent, of association by language and line, from Marianne Moore (1887) to Elizabeth Bishop (1911) to Amy Clampitt (1920): their interest in objects, in the humor of the observing eye, created some of the unconscious principles of sensory record in our century. A poet like Clampitt can no longer be dismissed as the best woman poet of her day (in the current generation the women are more interesting than the men); but when we lose our fear of differences between the sexes, something that defines the feminine may reside in these poems. It's not that men can't see this way; it's that behind such observation, so often, stands a woman.

Clampitt's later books were variations on her first, though her range grew more ambitious (and she grew to like shorter sentences): she wrote memorably about a tourist's culture (especially England and Venice —her poems on classical themes seem just shards from *Bulfinch's*), about writers and social figures she admired (particularly in the brilliant but overlong sequence on Keats—her brief lives were often merely dutiful), about the ignored byways of the natural world. Only the poems about politics or pop culture, from Maytag washers to John Lennon, show an unsure hand. Her later poems became more detached and explanatory—in a way she stopped living her perceptions. Hers was a poetry other in its interests; the few hints of unhappy love dropped in *The Kingfisher,* her first book, are never afterwards alluded to, and the recitals of daily events are without inner life. There was not progress so much as profusion. But what lovely and eccentric profusion! We were fortunate to have a poet so excited by the ordinary, who could make out of nothing, or almost nothing, these radiant, unlikely, lasting things.

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Books

Vulgar Rortyism

by Susan Haack

How quickly the visions of genius become the canned goods of intellectuals.
—Saul Bellow

Perhaps you know the old joke about the soldiers passing a message down the line—first man to second, "send reinforcements, we're going to advance"; next-to-last man to last, "send three-and-fourpence, we're going to a dance." Well, the history of pragmatism is like that—only more so.

C. S. Peirce, working scientist, pioneer of modern logic, and founder of pragmatism, envisaged a reformed, scientific philosophy which would use "the most rational methods it can devise, for finding out the little that can as yet be found out about the universe of mind and matter from those observations which every person can make in every hour of his waking life." His philosophy was informed by the pragmatic maxim, identifying the meaning of a concept with "the conceivable practical consequences,—that is, the consequences for deliberate, self-controlled conduct,—of the affirmation or denial of the concept." Peircean pragmatism is "prope-positivism," but, unlike the narrower positivism of Auguste Comte, "instead of merely jeering at metaphysics, . . . extracts from it a precious essence."

Richard Rorty, most influential of contemporary self-styled neo-pragmatists, proposes a revolutionary shift in which the metaphysical and epistemological territory at the traditional center of philosophy is abandoned and not re-occupied; the old preoccupation with method and argument is given up as we acknowledge that "there are no constraints on inquiry save conversational ones"; and philosophy disassociates itself from science and remakes itself as a genre of literature.

Peirce urged that philosophy be undertaken with the "scientific attitude," from the "Will to Learn," a genuine desire to discover the truth—which "is SO . . . whether you or I or anybody thinks it is so or not." But Rorty tells us he does "not have much use for notions like . . . 'objective truth'"; to call a statement true "is just to give it a rhetorical pat on the back." It would take serious inquiry to discover what is conducive to the interests of society, Peirce points out, declaring himself one of "that class of scalawags who purpose . . . to look the truth in the face, whether doing so be conducive to the interests of society or not." But Rorty tells us that pragmatists see philosophy as "*in the service* of democratic politics." Peirce wanted to "rescue the good ship Philosophy for the service of Science from the hands of the lawless rovers of the sea of literature." But Rorty tells us that "philosophy is best seen as a kind of writing."

Does Louis Menand, editor of the new anthology *Pragmatism: A Reader,* try to help us understand how this extraordinary transmutation of pragmatism came about, or attempt a sober assessment of the old message

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and the new?[1] Hardly. *His* purpose is to promote a Rortyesque neo-pragmatism.

Menand's "pragmatism" is "an effort to unhitch human beings from what pragmatists regard as a useless structure of bad abstractions"; the idea that "what people believe to be true is just what they think it is good to believe to be true"; that "the whole force of a philosophical account of anything . . . lies in the advertised [*sic*] consequences of accepting it"; that "if we do what is right, the metaphysics will take care of themselves." Rortyism is vulgar pragmatism; this is vulgar Rortyism.

Rorty dismisses Peirce as having merely given pragmatism its name. Menand offers his readers, for all the world as if it were the full authoritative story, a slanted history of a Rortyesque "pragmatism" founded by William James and Oliver Wendell Holmes, continued by John Dewey and George Herbert Mead, and gloriously revived by Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*.

But when James introduced pragmatism to the philosophical world in 1898, he described it as "the principle of Peirce," first enunciated "at Cambridge, in the early 70's." So Menand discounts both Peirce's and James's direct testimony: "James was, characteristically, doing a favor for a friend"; Peirce, already largely forgotten in the philosophical world, deceived himself about his own role in hopes of jumping on the pragmatist bandwagon James had set rolling. In fact, Menand assures us, the evidence that there even *was* a Metaphysical Club in Cambridge—where Peirce claimed he introduced the key ideas of pragmatism—"is thin."

On the contrary, the evidence is that Peirce's recollection was quite accurate.[2] Pointless nitpicking, Menand would reply; for "James and Holmes (and . . . Chauncey Wright and Nicholas St. John Green . . .) had already formulated what is distinctively pragmatic in their views before 1872. Peirce may have given James the name, but he could not have given him the idea." Menand has, however, conveniently omitted from his list of "classic pragmatist essays" Peirce's articles in *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* for 1868–9, which Richard J. Bernstein rightly describes as the first articulation of the key anti-foundationalist themes of the pragmatist tradition.

And Menand's grip on "the idea" of pragmatism is feeble at best. Sometimes he runs pragmatism together with James's doctrine of the Will to Believe. But both Peirce and Dewey repudiated this doctrine, and James himself, in a letter to Horace Kallen, struggled to distinguish it from pragmatism. Nor, apparently, is Menand aware of the differences between Peirce's logical, realist conception of pragmatism and James's more psychological, nominalist conception—nor of James's uncomprehending and disturbingly uncharitable reaction to Peirce's 1903 Harvard lectures articulating *Pragmatism as a Principle and Method of Right Thinking*.[3]

After cutting Peirce out of the pragmatist family portrait, Menand cheerfully caricatures James and Dewey as Rorty's philosophical ancestors—fudging James's pluralistic metaphysics into a trendy cultural pluralism, for example, and Dewey's concept of experience into culture. Who would dream, from Menand's account, of James's assurance that "pragmatism has no objection . . . to . . . abstractions, so long as . . . they actually carry you somewhere," and that "when . . . we give up the doctrine of objective certitude, we do not thereby give up the quest or hope of truth itself"? Who would guess that Dewey, noting how deeply social Peirce's theory of inquiry was, had described Peirce as "more of a pragmatist than James"?

Yes, but is this a good anthology with an infuriating introduction, you will be asking,

1 *Pragmatism: A Reader*, edited by Louis Menand; Vintage, 524 pages, $16.

2 See Max H. Fisch's "Was There a Metaphysical Club in Cambridge?" in *Studies in the Philosophy of Charles Sanders Peirce, Second Series* (1964).

3 For James's reaction, see Patricia Ann Turrisi's edition of the lectures (1997).

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or what? In brief, "what." Surprisingly, Menand includes quite a lot of Peirce—two pages, even, from those 1868–9 papers criticizing the Cartesian philosophy. But his selections are too scrappy to give readers much sense of that remarkable mind. Mead is here, and Hilary Putnam, and the paper of Bernstein's cited earlier. But there is nothing from Ramsey, C. I. Lewis, White, Quine, Goodman, Rescher—too analytic, perhaps; nothing from Sidney Hook; nothing from Louise Rosenblatt's transactional/triadic theory of reading, with its themes from Dewey and Peirce.

Even from the perspective of his own skewed history of pragmatism, Menand doesn't do a good job. He includes more from Peirce than from Holmes, and nothing from Holmes indicative of anything like Peirce's philosophical horsepower; nothing from Wright or Green; nothing from F. C. S. Schiller—whom Bertrand Russell described as the "literary protagonist of pragmatism," and who misread James in some of the same ways as Rorty; nothing from Kallen, Alain Locke or Randolph Bourne, to whom Menand credits the shift from metaphysical to cultural pluralism; a long paper of Rorty's on Jacques Derrida (where the only connection with classical pragmatism is that James's name is dropped once, amid scores of others), but nothing from Rorty's Introduction to *Consequences of Pragmatism*, nor anything from Rorty after 1983. Nor, despite Rorty's breezy observation that "it suits my purposes to define pragmatism as the attempt to do something Davidson approves of," is there anything from Donald Davidson. (And a reader wanting to fill such gaps will not find Menand's bibliography much help.)

The priority is to make room for "pragmatist" writings from other disciplines: e.g., Richard Poirier reminiscing about "Hum. 6" at Amherst College; Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels urging the impossibility of a theory of literary interpretation; Richard Posner on legal "pragmatism"—including this gem: "If there is no objective truth, . . . this makes it all the more important to maintain the conditions necessary for the unforced inquiry required to challenge and defeat all those false claims to have found the truth"; Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob seeking "a philosophical grounding compatible with" their advocacy of "the democratic practice of history." Perhaps this bit of revisionary philosophy of history—quite a come-down from Dewey's long-winded but sometimes subtle and savvy reflections on democracy earlier in the book—is included by way of justification for Menand's revisionary history of philosophy.

Presumably, Menand's selections were made in the spirit of his fulsome admiration for Rorty's self-transformation from professional philosopher to "intellectual," no longer relying on a paradigm but on his genius. The fuzziness of Rorty's contrast of "pragmatism" versus "professional philosophy" serves Menand well. Though the range of Peirce's thought, as well as its depth, was enormously greater than Rorty's, and Peirce's brief career at Johns Hopkins ended in disaster, he can be dismissed—his pragmatism became "quite technical." Like Rorty, Menand can't, or won't, distinguish between necessary, useful technicality, and jargon or pseudo-mathematics substituting for genuine rigor; nor between the laudable goal of broadening philosophy professors' intellectual horizons beyond the narrow confines of the *Journal of Philosophy*, and the intoxicating illusion that "I don't see why we need/how we can have a theory of ——" constitutes a real contribution to our understanding of ——.

The "pragmatism" Menand admires is not only anti-philosophical; it is also, though more covertly, profoundly anti-intellectual. Repudiating the idea that beliefs are objectively true or false, evidence objectively better or worse, Rortyism induces a factitious despair of the possibility of real inquiry of any kind, misprizes the truths that literature can teach us, and undermines the hope of knowing what would truly improve the condition of society.

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The cover design—a book, largely destroyed, with "PRAGMATISM" printed on the remains—makes this covert anti-intellectualism clearer than Menand is willing to do. He seems pleased that "pragmatism . . . suggest[s] that the real work of the world is being done somewhere other than in philosophy departments"; but leaves it conveniently unclear where he thinks that real work *is* being done—in departments of literature, history, etc.? in the pages of the *TLS*, *The New York Review of Books*, and such? in the real world?

Rorty, in Menand's judgment, "is a far more exciting writer than Dewey, and his work has served for many people as a model for the kind of wide-ranging engagement with art, ideas, and public affairs that pragmatism might make possible." Perhaps unaware of Mussolini's enthusiasm for a "pragmatism" subordinating intellectual life to politics, Menand seems to take for granted that such engagement would inevitably be benign.

And, while his biographical notes on Dewey mention Dewey's work with Jane Addams's settlement house, in the founding of the ACLU, on the commission to investigate Stalin's charges against Trotsky, his notes on Rorty mention only academic books and honors; as do his notes on Cornel West, who, however, tells us that "prophetic pragmatists" like himself are different from those "traditional intellectuals . . . comfortably nested in the academy." The effect—presumably unintended, and for all I know quite unfair—will surely be to put some readers in mind of James's shrewd words about the "nerveless sentimentalist and dreamer, who spends his life in a weltering sea of sensibility and emotion, but who never does a manly concrete deed."

But I'm not worried about *those* readers, the ones with the discernment and determination to winnow out the good stuff from the rest. Though hoping against hope that Peirce was wrong that "in the matter of ideas the public prefer the cheap and nasty," I worry about the readers, especially the students, who will naïvely suppose that Menand has fairly represented what is worthwhile in the tradition of classical pragmatism—and conclude that that tradition is worthless, or, even worse, that vulgar Rortyism *is* what we should learn from it. It's a shame.

Shakespeare's one poem

Stephen Greenblatt, et al., editors
The Norton Shakespeare:
Based on the Oxford Edition.
Norton, 3,422 pages, $65

reviewed by Paul Dean

The Oxford Shakespeare (old- and modern-spelling editions), and its bulky *Textual Companion*, both first published in 1988, have not yet been wholly accepted by the community of textual scholars, and *The Norton Shakespeare* takes issue with several of its predecessor's decisions. For instance, it reverses Oxford's substitution of the name "Oldcastle" for "Falstaff" in the two parts of *Henry IV* and inserts passages unique to Quarto *Hamlet* (marked as such) within the Folio text. Where Oxford includes both the Quarto and Folio texts of *King Lear*, Norton prints them on facing pages, adding (less justifiably) a third, conflated text, as well. The editors follow Oxford in including "Shall I die?" as Shakespeare's, and add in an appendix the poem "A Funeral Elegy" (1612) with an introduction by Donald W. Foster, who argues for Shakespearean authorship (he might have included in his bibliography the debate on this question between Stanley Wells and Richard Abrams in the London *Times Literary Supplement* in January and February of 1996). However, they miss the chance to rectify an omission which the Oxford editors themselves reportedly regret, by leaving out *Edward III*. The reader who already possesses the Oxford edition will find little here, in textual terms, to justify further financial outlay. Moreover, the volume is atrociously produced, on wafer-thin, see-through paper,

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with illustrations which would be helpful if one could make out their details, and a typeface too small for comfortable reading. I am sure readers would have been more willing to pay for a usable edition in two or even three volumes.

The enterprise, then, stands or falls by its extensive introductions to individual plays, marginal glosses, explanatory footnotes, bibliographies, and supplementary matter. These are the responsibility of the editorial team of Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard, and Katharine Eisaman Maus (Andrew Gurr contributes a single, characteristically authoritative, essay on the Shakespearean stage). The general introduction, by Greenblatt, contains, as is to be expected from that address, firm denials of the "trans-historical" qualities of Shakespeare and of "a single, stable, continuous object" underlying all the adaptations, productions, and interpretations. It is always salutary to remember, when faced with such overstatements, the claim of the editors of the First Folio, Heminges and Condell, in their epistle "To the Great Variety of Readers," to offer a text both correct where previous unauthorized editions were faulty, and authentic—"absolute in their numbers, as he [Shakespeare] conceived them"—where plays appear for the first time. They, clearly, share what Greenblatt dismissively (and politically incorrectly) calls "the dream of a master text." Also, they treat the plays as literature, not scripts: "*Read* him, therefore; and again, and again" (italics mine). It was Jonson, not Shakespeare, who was ridiculed for daring to think of his plays as "works." (To be fair, that is a description which the Folio title page avoids; and Shakespeare's apparent unconcern for the fate of his plays remains baffling.) Of course, Heminges and Condell wished to persuade people to part with their money; and we know that their confidence in the purity of the text was sometimes misplaced. That does not detract from the fact that the amorphousness of the text and the provisional nature of theatrical representation, which Greenblatt and most other contemporary critics see as defining characteristics of Renaissance aesthetics, seem not to bulk very large in their minds.

There are other moments in the general introduction which make a reader wince; the frankly conjectural "reconstruction" of Shakespeare's early years, or the insistence on "the fetishism of dress" (which quickly runs to a prurient fascination with what Renaissance critics always solemnly call "the body," as though they had just looked down and noticed it), or the assumption, now beyond question in the academy, that Shakespeare *must* have been a political and religious radical, who never penned an unironic sentiment. Still, the sketch of the social and political history of Shakespeare's lifetime is unexceptionable, and the account of his life uncontentious (although, as usual, the possibility of his having been a Catholic is scanted). At the other end of the volume there is a handy and generous section of documents: biographical notices of Shakespeare by his contemporaries, a transcription of his will, the preliminary matter to the First Folio (in facsimile), a year-by-year listing of events from 1558 to 1616 taken from Stow's abridged *Chronicle* (1618), and a general bibliography to supplement those appended to introductions to the individual plays. The bibliographies are comprehensive, up-to-date, and generally fair-minded; the only real shock was the omission of John Kerrigan's landmark edition of the *Sonnets and "A Lover's Complaint"* (1986).

Why should anyone nowadays want a single-volume Shakespeare? One reason is that, unlike multivolume editions, it allows us relatively uncluttered access to the texts —which are, after all, the things that matter. Another is that a single-volume edition offers us a way of seeing how a coherent editorial policy has or has not made sense of Shakespeare's work as a whole. Most of all, perhaps, such an edition provides a way of pondering the implications of T. S. Eliot's celebrated remark that "the whole of Shakespeare is *one* poem." The Norton arrangement of texts follows their presumed order of composition, and it is instructive to

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compare this with the generic arrangement of the Folio. To read the plays in the Folio order provides its own kind of illumination. For example, to pass from *Twelfth Night* to *The Winter's Tale* is to be made to reflect on how both plays have apparently miraculous transformations lying at their heart; *Julius Caesar* and *Macbeth* make a fruitful pairing, with Brutus in some ways a preliminary study for the later, more complex reluctant assassin. The Histories—placed by Heminges and Condell between the Comedies and Tragedies, as though to bridge the gap between Time as redeemer and Time as destroyer by showing its Janus-face—are more securely arranged, enabling us to follow the events of the tetralogies chronologically and placing *King John* and *Henry VIII* on either side. To the formalist perspective on Shakespeare's evolution offered by the First Folio, Norton opposes its own, skimpily summarized by Greenblatt as "a kind of authorial plot, a progress from youthful exuberance and a heroic grappling with history, through psychological anguish and radical doubt, to a mature serenity built upon an understanding of loss. The ordering of Shakespeare's 'complete works' in this way reconstitutes the figure of the author as the beloved hero of his own, lived romance." This is surprisingly personal, not to say sentimental, coming from Greenblatt; there isn't much self-fashioning about such a nakedly confessional Shakespeare. Why, in any case, should he "live" a "romance" rather than a comedy or a tragedy or a history? "There is a history in all men's lives. . . ."

The introductions to the individual plays are by far the best feature of *The Norton Shakespeare*, and it is to be hoped that the publishers will reprint them as a separate volume. They are evenly distributed among the four editors. The number of questionable judgments is small. Katharine Eisaman Maus does not seem to have the measure of Christianity when she says, in her introduction to *The Merchant of Venice*, that "the central virtues in this religious *system* are not justice and scrupulous compliance with the law but charity, mercy, and a willingness to believe what seems incredible" (italics mine). Jean E. Howard on *The Winter's Tale* goes oddly awry in her emphasis, making much of the speculation that "Leontes' rage at Hermione seems to stem in part from his dependence on her to give him legitimate heirs," and stressing the etymology of the name Mamillius from the Latin word for nipple: "In identifying with Mamillius, a boy so young his nurse's milk is scarcely out of him, Leontes seems to feel both the vulnerability of the infant dependent on the lactating body of woman and the vulnerability of the adult husband dependent on the pregnant body and the chastity of his wife for legitimate offspring." In positing a startlingly articulate baby, Howard offers a world of wonders indeed, but one, we may think, somewhat different from Shakespeare's.

Elsewhere, however, there are plenty of fine insights, just the kind of thing to alert student readers to the qualities of each play. The editors are particularly good advocates of less celebrated plays, or those which are difficult of access. The comedies are notoriously apt to fall flat on uninstructed ears; Cohen teases out the guardedness with which *Love's Labour's Lost* plays its romantic games, stressing the tone of disenchantment which underlies, without undermining, its high spirits, while Greenblatt offers excellent links between Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier* and *Much Ado About Nothing*, and responds vibrantly to the exuberance, shadowed by unease, of the play's language and atmosphere. Maus writes brilliantly about *Timon of Athens*, one of the most underrated plays in the canon, placing it on the socio-economic fault line in early Jacobean England, in which the obligations of friendship or patronage were giving way to impersonal business transactions, and seeing it looking backward to *The Merchant of Venice* and forward to *King Lear*. (She is rightly attracted by the growing belief in Middleton's part authorship of *Timon*, whose concerns resonate strongly with those of his citizen comedies.) Howard's introduction to *Cym-*

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beline makes sense of its disparate elements by relating them to Shakespeare's interest in imperialism and nationhood—although Philip Edwards's fine discussion of the play from this viewpoint in *Threshold of a Nation* (1979) is unmentioned—and convinces us that, beneath the apparent pseudo-historical medley, a politically shrewd intelligence is operating.

When they are not performing for a student audience, and feeling obliged to live up to some sort of image, these four professors are just like any other intelligent readers of Shakespeare. Whatever they say about the nonexistence of fixed meanings, they are happy to provide explanatory notes on the vocabulary of the plays, and in their critical discussions they assume that the text means something coherent, and that we can find its meanings out by source study, structural analysis, characterization, attention to imagery, historical context, and other traditional matters. It is cheering to be reminded by *The Norton Shakespeare* that, provided the coast is clear, you can't beat a radical when it comes to being old-fashioned.

Reaping what is Soane

David Watkin Sir John Soane: Enlightenment Thought and the Royal Academy Lectures. Cambridge University Press, 738 pages, $125

reviewed by J. Duncan Berry

It may seem trite to declare at the outset that the history of architecture is a significantly different enterprise than the history of its theory. But it is worth pausing to reflect on these differences for a moment, for in so doing one begins to perceive the subtle and often very slippery passages between thought and act. I am of the opinion that these passages, when properly investigated, can contribute as deep an insight into the nature of human artistic endeavor as pure aesthetic contemplation. The book under consideration offers as splendid an example of this position as one could hope for.

The history of architecture concerns itself with the evolution of the building art. Visual analysis of concrete objects is the cornerstone and the keystone of successful architectural history. It is not uncommon for an accomplished architectural historian to make use of research presented by ancillary disciplines and methods, including biography, archival and paleographic study, art history, the history of technology, economic history, urban studies, and beyond. Such tangible evidence as contracts, drawings, correspondence, and the universe of architectural forms demands mastery.

By contrast, the history of architectural theory is more closely aligned with the subject matter, tools, and methods of the history of ideas or literary history than with the history of architecture per se. A whole canon of texts, anchored by the Roman architect Vitruvius, requires extensive sampling before one can pose a challenging question. Instead of reverberating with the activity inside the mason's hut, theory tends to spin off toward the ethereal realms of mathematics, music, scholarship, poetry, and related forms of literary activity. While some "aeries" are studied because they continue to exude a hypnotic charm, theoretical activity as a whole can be seen to exhibit properties that possess genuine historical significance; not only can theory be used as a lens through which buildings can be scrutinized by contemporary criteria, but it also exerts a palpable, gravitational force upon those architects for whom the design process is open to the priorities and precepts established by authorities active or influential in the profession at a given time. Hence we can trace the peregrination of a form through time because of its importance as an "idea carrier." By the same token, political or religious turbulence can be masked by visual orthodoxy imposed by tacit acceptance of a given theoretical paradigm. In short, theory endows forms with symbolic value; as a result, the inter-

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pretive problems presented by theoretical inquiry are manifold, treacherous, and truly exciting.

David Watkin, a fellow of Peterhouse and reader in the history of architecture at the University of Cambridge, is arguably among the two or three most accomplished and engaging architectural historians practicing today. An prolific writer of articles, monographs, surveys, gazetteers, and even a well-rounded history of architectural history, Watkin is perhaps most famous (or infamous) for his scandalously brilliant demolition of the historicist fallacy in *Architecture and Morality*. It is a work of such polemical force and intellectual gravity that it can only be compared to Wilhelm Worringer's *Abstraction and Empathy*. For nearly half a generation, it has not just challenged the orthodoxies by which and through which we "see" modern architecture, but it has also changed the way we choose to think about it. While Watkin is probably the only architectural historian whose London *pied-à-terre* and whose students' flats have appeared in the leading interior design magazines, he is certainly the only contemporary historian of architecture whose work has spawned a school, beginning with the "Club 1830" a few years ago. All this and participation on the faculty of the Prince of Wales's institute of architecture render him a force to be reckoned with in matters of taste and scholarship. A more qualified guide to the prolific and prolix architectural theory of Sir John Soane, England's premier classicist of the nineteenth century, cannot be imagined. Watkin's detective work is exhaustive, his narrative is both comprehensive and compelling, and the visual material is simply exquisite. Rarely does one have the opportunity to indulge in such a work combining outstanding intellectual rigor, refined literary exposition, and flawless production values.

But make no mistake about it, this is hardly light reading in any sense of the phrase. Tipping the scales at eight pounds, this is a book that cannot be comfortably read in one's lap, on a plane, in bed, or without a generous, sturdy, and perhaps reinforced desk. It is very clearly and cleverly arranged, however. Some 488 pages of single-column scholarly material serve to introduce another 177 double-column pages transcribing Soane's manuscripts for his cycle of twelve Royal Academy lectures. The book's design and layout, while traditional, are exemplary and ideal models for all related publishing efforts: all verbal information is kept on the same page through the use of footnotes; illustrations are *hors texte*, requiring a suspension of one's literary activity in order to treat thoughtfully the images as images, and not as illustrations; and finally, a battery of appendices documents the physical location and condition of the materials, both literary and visual. Watkin also provides excerpted historical information regarding the composition and delivery of the lectures. In this, as well as in the general editorial decisions regarding the lectures themselves, he is following in the steps of the late Wolfgang Herrmann, without doubt the man most responsible for launching the history of architectural theory as an independent, scientific enterprise.

Watkin's introduction is divided into two sections: the first treats Soane's intellectual preparation, the second presents a lecture-by-lecture synopsis and exegesis that weaves together all of the various strands proffered in the first section. While Watkin sees Soane standing wholly within the compass of Enlightenment thought, he offers up a multitude of provocative connections that serve to extend the trajectory of Renaissance humanism through the architectural theories that embraced various forms of the doctrines of civic virtue, character, and decorum. Soane's full debt to and engagement with the theories of William Chambers, William Sandby, and his first master, George Dance, is patiently and carefully explored. The opening chapter, "Architectural Discourse from Wotton to Sandby," must now be considered the best treatment of this material available, fully supplanting the second half of the otherwise reliable account

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in chapter nineteen of the late Hanno-Walter Kruft's *History of Architectural Theory* (Princeton Architectural Press, 1994). Watkin's second chapter details the institutional background for the development of Soane's theory at the Royal Academy.

The third, fourth, and fifth chapters constitute the centerpiece of Watkin's introduction. Here Watkin discusses Soane's absorption of the major themes of Enlightenment architectural theory: primitivism, character, and sensationalism, and the symbolical language of antiquity. Watkin's expertise, like Soane's own scrupulous regard for keeping track of every source he read or translated, shines forth on every page. Watkin gives each theme a masterly introduction and proceeds with a topical approach, picking up the strand as present in one author, say the primitivism of the German art historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann, and following it through Rousseau, Marc-Antoine Laugier, and Montesquieu and a dozen others quoted or referred to by Soane. The result of reading these magnificent, crystalline chapters (preferably at one sitting) is an expanded appreciation of the complex interplay between ideas as well as between ideas and creative acts.

The second part of Watkin's introduction consists of a thorough analysis of the entire lecture cycle. As literature, of course, this kind of reading is pretty stultifying. As a guidebook, however, it is indispensable. For when one finally reaches the lectures themselves, they fairly bristle with all of the material that has been so carefully and painstakingly arranged in the first several hundred pages. As it turns out, one of the most interesting things about the lectures is what they omit. Indeed, Watkin's comprehensive perspective (having read, digested, and creatively ordered virtually all of Soane's extant correspondence, notes, memoranda, and marginalia) enables him to see not just what is in the lectures but also what is only alluded to, often provocatively, elsewhere. A case in point is Soane's handling of the Baron d'Hancarville's vivid and explicitly sexual origins of religious practice and sym-

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bolism. Unlike those who rejected d'Hancarville out of hand, Soane took the theory seriously but remained too timid to broach the themes verbally, content to adorn the façades of many commissions with symbols whose origins and destinations declare his true sympathies.

In themselves, Soane's lectures offer up a dauntingly strong cocktail. From the opening paragraphs, it is plainly evident that Soane's literary gifts pale in comparison to his design talents. As one reads through the lectures, infuriating repetitions and courtly verbal curlicues melt away when one runs across a searing insight or a fruitful comparison—reminders that, despite the literary affectations, Soane was a refined thinker and a discriminating visionary, and that entire vistas in an eighteenth-century mind can shed light on how we address today's concerns. This is especially so in lecture eleven with regard to Soane's compulsion to justify ornament. Eliminate his feeble periodic structure and one could be speaking with a contemporary about the virtues and vices of elaborate decorative programs for corporate headquarters.

Time and again, Soane's center points come up in the lectures: his emphasis on achieving an appropriate character for a given building or type, his insistence upon returning to first principles, his contempt for English as opposed to French building, and his antipathy to speculative building. In these issues and others, Soane comes across as the most continentally minded British architect since Inigo Jones, and Soane's obvious hero was the French architect Jacques-François Blondel. Soane's overall opposition to the Greek Revival, and by extension its practitioners, led him to criticize in lecture four George Dance's Royal College of Surgeons as well as Robert Smirke's Royal Opera House in Covent Garden. Criticizing British architects, and living ones at that, was for his colleagues simply beyond the pale, and the resulting furor forced Soane's suspension from the Academy for three years. Even by today's standards, the behavioral consequences of Soane's obsessive self-pity make for shocking reading. In the end, Soane may not be regarded as a significant theorist on his own but rather as an important synthetic thinker who creatively brought together a multitude of issues and sources. His theory possesses neither the internal coherence of a William Morris nor the epochal foresight of a Gottfried Semper. Instead, Soane appears more like the Aquinas of the *encyclopédistes*.

Admittedly, if one is looking for something of immediate use in trying to figure out the background of today's theoretical disputes, one should look elsewhere. If, however, one is looking to fill in one's understanding of eighteenth-century architecture through the ideas of the Enlightenment, there is no more solid presentation in the English language than this. Biased though it may be to the refracting lens of Soane's vigorous theoretical enterprise, Watkin offers a deeply refreshing look at the mainstays of the classical tradition. The result is a refinement of one's appreciation of the architecture through an enhanced grasp of the theory. And this is the intersection, of idea and act, that enables us to learn from and build constructively and meaningfully upon our own artistic traditions.

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Notebook

The new museum: entertainment or political theater?

by Roger Kimball

It's cheap. It's fast. It offers great shopping, tempting food and a place to hang out. And visitors can even enjoy the art.
—"Glory Days for the Art Museum," *The New York Times*, October 5, 1997

Since 1970, the number of art museums in the United States is said to have increased by more than 50 percent. There's hardly a self-respecting town or hamlet that feels complete these days without some sort of museum or "arts center." At the same time, established institutions have embarked on an extraordinary building frenzy. Is there any major museum that has not lately added, or at least has plans to add, a wing, pavilion, suite of new galleries, performance space, or sculpture court into which is decanted the mandatory restaurant, gift shop, retail outlet, gourmet coffee emporium, and interactive video learning center with a high-speed connection to the Internet? Under Thomas Krens, the Guggenheim Museum has gone even further. The word "Director" had hardly dried on Mr. Krens's door before he put his policy of museological Manifest Destiny into action. There's the boxy new building towering over the museum's original Frank Lloyd Wright structure on upper Fifth Avenue, of course, as well as the renovated loft spaces downtown at Prince Street and Broadway known as the Guggenheim Museum SoHo. Then there are the various colonial outposts of the Guggenheim, including, most recently, the one-hundred-million-dollar titanium-clad folly by Frank Gehry in Bilbao, Spain.

I had occasion to think of Mr. Krens and his empire—or "galaxy," to use the term he seems to favor—when I attended a two-day symposium on "Reimagining Museums for New Art" at the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Massachusetts, one weekend at the end of September. As was wholly appropriate, the slick spirit of Thomas Krens was very much palpable in that picturesque, well-heeled corner of the Berkshires throughout the festivities. After all, Mr. Krens had come to the Guggenheim from the Williams College Museum of Art, just a short walk from the Clark Art Institute.

It was while he was at Williams that Mr. Krens developed his distinctive, and widely imitated, approach to directing museums, an approach that combines entrepreneurial savvy with inveterate trendiness. It was then, too, that Mr. Krens hatched—or brooded over, anyway—the idea of converting a huge abandoned factory complex in the neighboring blue-collar town of North Adams into the world's biggest museum of contemporary art. When he got to the Guggenheim, the idea of collaborating with the planned Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, as the project was called, occupied a prominent place on his busy agenda. The state of Massachusetts committed thirty-five million dollars to the

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project. For his part, Mr. Krens sold off a Kandinsky, a Chagall, and a Modigliani from the Guggenheim's "permanent" collection in order to buy works—or, in some cases, plans for works—by Donald Judd and other Minimalists with which to decorate the facility.

By the early 1990s, Mass MOCA seemed as illusory as the so-called "Massachusetts Miracle" over which Michael Dukakis had presided as governor of the state. But it turns out that Mass MOCA wasn't dead: it was merely lying in wait. As Joseph Thompson, the new director, explained in his opening address at the Clark, enough money has so far been raised to renovate two hundred thousand square feet—about a third—of the old factory complex. Following collaborative designs by Frank Gehry, Robert Venturi, and the venerable firm of Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill, this portion of Mass MOCA is scheduled to open in a little more than a year with a vast array of galleries, restaurants, performance spaces, and numerous tony commercial clients.

Mr. Thompson, a museum director very much in the mold of Thomas Krens, was irrepressibly cheerful and enthusiastic. Mass MOCA, he promised, would revitalize the economically ravaged town of North Adams not merely with its myriad new businesses but also by luring the many tourists who visit Tanglewood and other cultural attractions in the Berkshires to North Adams to experience the wonders of postmodern art in Mass MOCA's acres of galleries.

I believe that a large dollop of skepticism is in order. In the first place, it is extremely doubtful that many of the tourists who journey to the Berkshires for the beauty of its scenery and the pop-classical music programming of Tanglewood are going to be much interested in the Minimalist art of Donald Judd or cutting-edge video pieces by David Byrne.

But even more dubious than such pragmatic considerations is the idea of the museum presupposed by Mr. Thompson's sales pitch. Like many museum directors these days, Mr. Thompson wants two very different sorts of things. He speaks at one moment like a chamber of commerce cheerleader, dispensing visions of benign gentrification and urban amenity. But what is meant to bring about this yuppie paradise is the kind of "transgressive," often politically charged art that disdains the bourgeois values that the museum is presumed to be nurturing. The result is an exercise in cynical hucksterism. "Art" is the talisman before which the public is meant to bow down and open its pocketbook. But the vast majority of the art in question is as repugnant to the public as the public—though not, of course, the public's money—is to the "artists" responsible for such art.

As the subsequent presentations at the Clark symposium made clear (if any further clarity on the subject were required), one thing conspicuously missing from the new museology is any concern with aesthetic value. Art was a commercial resource to be marketed and exploited as aggressively as possible; it was also a megaphone for various socio-political sentiments; art as an aesthetic phenomenon either did not come into the discussion at all or—on the few occasions when it it did slip in—was promptly castigated as unacceptably elitist.

The roster of speakers at the Clark included European and American museum administrators, a sort of performance artist called Rirkrit Tiravanija, a businessman, and an academic. It would be bootless to say much about most of the presentations. For anyone familiar with the sociology of the contemporary art world, it was simply business as usual: commercial acuity laced with political animus. Michael Dorf, who founded a nightclub and popular Internet web page called the Knitting Factory, was easily the most articulate and amusing speaker. But it was by no means clear that what he had to say about making money from the Internet had anything to do with art. Mr. Tiravanija recited a manifesto by Claes Oldenberg while playing rock music and flashing slides depicting his "work," e.g., pictures of people making a meal and

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eating it in a museum. Among other enlightening things, he told the audience that he did not see why an institution that was supposed to serve the public should ever be closed.

Mr. Tiravanija belongs to that large and growing body of artists and critics who are bent on breaking down the distinction between art and life. Thus he exhibits a replica of his apartment, invites people into it, and calls it art. (It was not surprising that Mr. Tiravanija should later advise the audience to "forget the object.") Similarly, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, an academic at New York University with the marvelous title of professor of performance studies, announced in the course of her paean to the making of a gigantic quilt commemorating victims of AIDS that "simply everybody is an artist; one doesn't have to be a professional." The only distinction between art and life such artists and critics are sure to maintain is the one determining who gets paid for declaring that there is no difference between art and life.

Easily the most noxious presentation was by Declan McGonagle, director of the newly created Irish Museum of Modern Art in Dublin. Mr. McGonagle is an academic radical straight out of central casting. Like some of his brethren in the IRA, his favorite words seem to be "negotiation" and "renegotiation," by which he seems to mean "capitulation." The museum as traditionally conceived, Mr. McGonagle told us, was the product of nasty things like "industrial capitalism" and a "privileged, white, Western European" view of the world and of art. Like banks and nation states, he said, the traditional museum was obsessed with "fixing value." "Fixing value" was something Mr. McGonagle was very much against—at least unless it was he who got to do the fixing. "Exclusion in support of excellence," he told us, "is simply not an option in Ireland, or anywhere else." He did not say what he thought about exclusion in the name of political orthodoxy. Mr. McGonagle generously allowed that the antiquated, politically incorrect image of the museum he excoriated should not simply be denied. Instead, it should be brought to "the table for renegotiation at the end of the twentieth century." Adamantly opposed to the "hierarchical narrative" put forward by museums as traditionally conceived, he looked forward to a new kind of museum that would collaborate in the "construction" of a new "narrative," challenging tradition and undertaking a "fundamental renegotiation of cultural and political identity."

As an example of the kind of "negotiation" he had in mind, Mr. McGonagle described a project he supported that consisted of billboards emblazoned with legends like "Execute God," "Blast God," and "Kill God." In part, he said, this was an effort "to see if it was possible to make religious art at the end of the twentieth-century." With evident glee, he described the reaction of "fundamentalist Catholic" organizations who attacked the project, vandalized the billboards, and "accused us of blasphemy"—a comment that elicited titters from an audience far too sophisticated to believe in anything like blasphemy. Mr. McGonagle professed to be surprised by the Catholic reaction. "We didn't seek the controversy," he said—an observation that, since Mr. McGonagle is not a stupid man, I have to put down to simple bad faith.

Most of what one heard at "Reimagining Museums for New Art" was the usual postmodern boilerplate. Nevertheless, the event was unusually dispiriting, partly, I suspect, because it was held at the Clark Art Institute, a handsome small museum in a handsome setting that, until fifteen minutes ago, was content to preserve and exhibit its collection and assist serious art historical scholarship. But the Clark has clearly decided that being a serious museum is not enough; it must also be "with it": which means, in part, sponsoring symposia where the traditional role of the museum is "interrogated" by academic art administrators whose chief interest in art is as a money-producing form of political theater.

It is a very odd situation. On the one

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hand, museums everywhere seem determined to transform themselves into an extension of the entertainment and recreation industry. On the other hand, behind the coffee bars, video arcades, and Matisse T-shirts, more and more museums are committing themselves to a radical revisionist program that would have us view all art through the lens of political activism. The result is what we might called cappuccino radicalism.

A few weeks ago, *The New York Times* ran an article on the front page of its Sunday Arts & Leisure section called "Glory Days for the Art Museum" by Judith H. Dobrzynski. Ms. Dobrzynski informed readers that "It looks as if the 90's are the age of the art museum in the United States, perhaps even the golden age." Although she contrasted the contemporary "glory days" with the "dark ages" of yesteryear when museums encouraged "contemplation" and existed "primarily for elite visitors," Ms. Dobrzynski did acknowledge that "the age of museums is not to be confused with the age of art or the age of art appreciation. Much museumgoing is not about art at all. It's simply social. . . . It's entertainment, not enlightenment or inspiration."

Indeed. The problem, as seen by Philippe de Montebello, the director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and one of the few sensible voices heard in the museum world today, is that what gets lost in this orgy of marketing and entertainment is the experience of art. "The trouble," Mr. de Montebello observed, "is that works of art, for the most part, are not fun. In fact, they can be difficult, challenging, even provocative, and they don't yield their message in the blink of an eye—which is what is expected of people looking to have fun. Seriousness, uplift, knowledge and, naturally, *pleasure* are what art museums are meant to provide." Of course, Mr. McGonagle & Co. would be quick to agree that works of art can—indeed, should—be "difficult, challenging, even provocative." But the challenge they want art to deliver is fundamentally a political not an aesthetic challenge. And as for aesthetic *pleasure* . . . well, that depends entirely on the sort of discriminating excellence that Mr. McGonagle and his fellow radicals insist should be dispensed with. "As each day passes," Mr. McGonagle said in the course of his talk, "it becomes clearer and clearer that we are at the end of something." If he is right—and I fear that he may be—what we are at the end of is the museum as an institution dedicated to the defense of the values of civilization.

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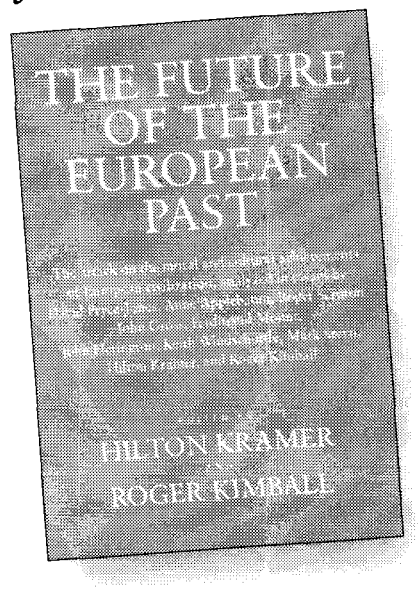

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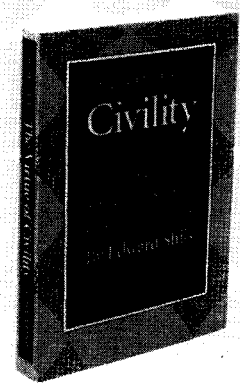

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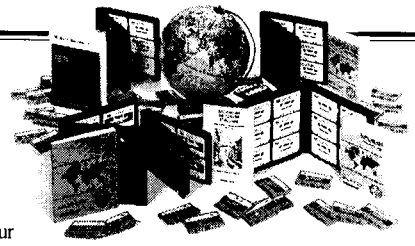

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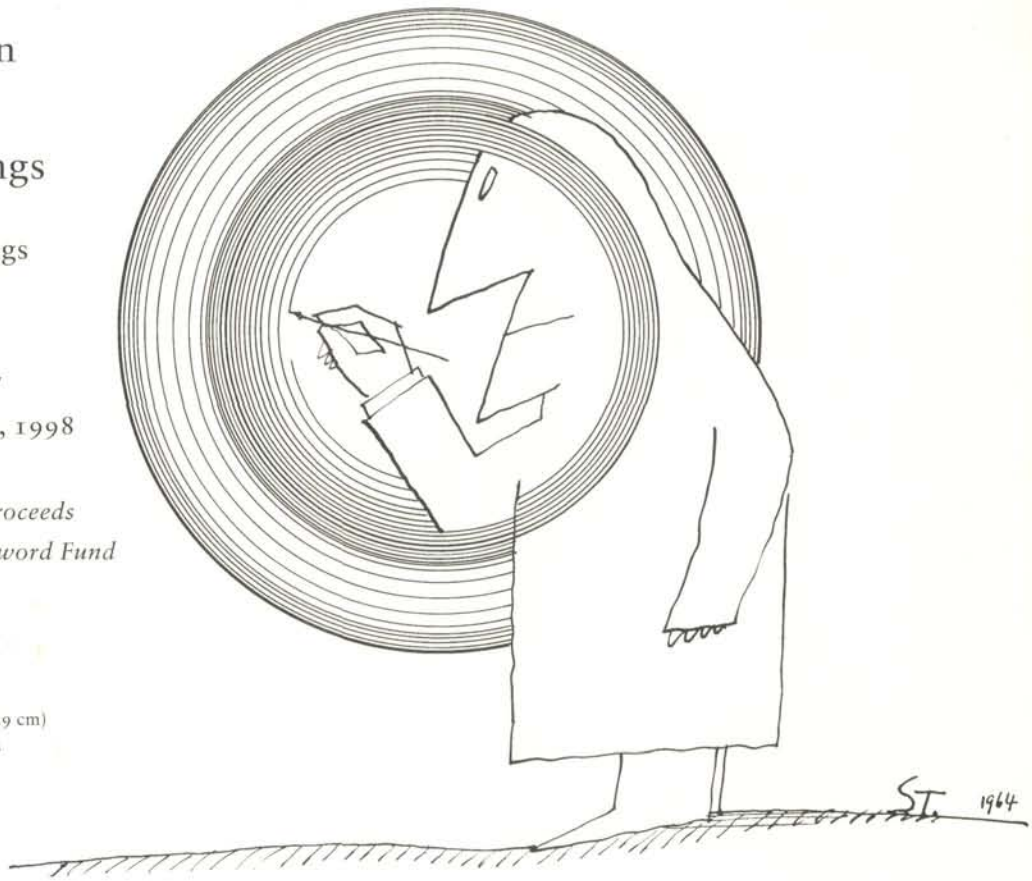

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